

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 9

TIM CAHILL

Australia's talisman eyes
AFC Asian Cup success
on home soil

ISSUE
9

January 2015



PLUS NASSIR AL SHAMRANI

AFC Player of
the Year Award
for Saudi Arabia
striker



AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015

Asia's top 16 nations prepare
to go head-to-head at the
continental championship



KI SUNG-YUENG

Korea Republic's Swansea
City midfielder eyes a
successful return to
Australia in January



DJAMEL BELMADI

After winning November's Gulf Cup,
the Algerian coach of Qatar has his
sights set on the continent's biggest
prize at the AFC Asian Cup



TSUNEYASU MIYAMOTO

The former Japan captain looks
back on his vital role in the
Samurai Blue's AFC Asian Cup-
winning campaign in 2004.

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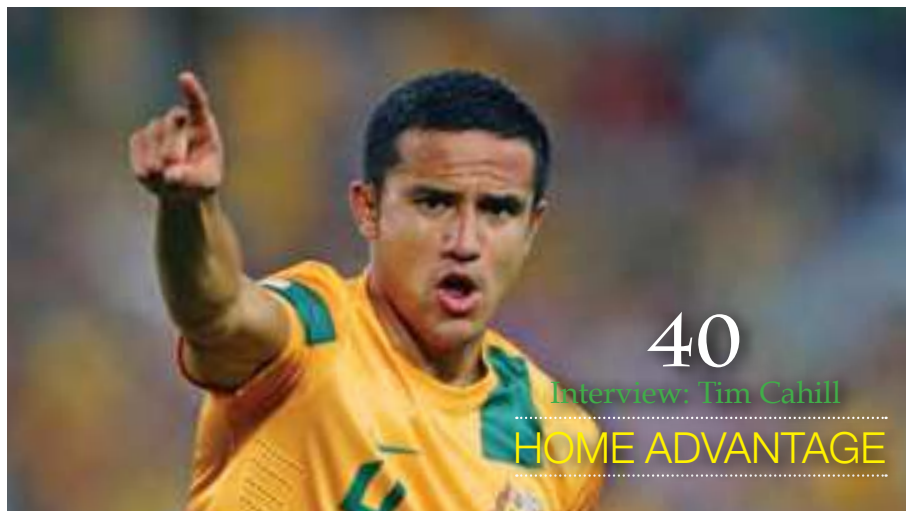
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AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015

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The principal activities of QP, its subsidiaries and joint ventures are the exploration, production, local and international sale of crude oil, natural gas and gas liquids, refined products, synthetic fuels, petrochemicals, fuel additives, fertilizers, liquefied natural gas (LNG), steel and aluminium.

QP's strategy of conducting hydrocarbon exploration and development are through Exploration and Production Sharing Agreements (EPSA) and Development and Production Sharing Agreements (DPSA) concluded with major international oil and gas companies.

The operations and activities of QP and its affiliates are conducted at various onshore locations, including Doha, Dukhan and the Mesaieed and Ras Laffan Industrial Cities, as well as offshore areas, including Halul Island, offshore production stations, drilling platforms and the North Field.

Thriving on a spirit of enterprise, our joint ventures are underpinned by transparency, innovation and high standards of quality and service. At Qatar Petroleum, we are committed to one thing above all: Excellence.



Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

The year 2014 has now drawn to a close, and what a year it has been. If there is one word that could aptly sum up the year, it would surely be 'progress.'

Asian football has made impressive progress on all fronts throughout the past 12 months. The efforts to reform and revitalise football in Asia, be it in governance, development or social responsibility, have been taken to an even higher level in 2014, and credit for this should be given to the Member Associations.

The competitions, activities and new initiatives that were carried out in 2014 have brought Asian football to a higher level as regards development and competitiveness. We have also witnessed the flourishing of our younger generation of stars who will soon be responsible for carrying the continent's hopes and aspirations forward.

The culmination of this season's AFC Champions League and AFC Cup competitions with the crowning of new champions in Western Sydney Wanderers of Australia and Al Qadsia of Kuwait respectively, exhibited wonderfully the competitive spirit of Asian clubs, and I must extend my congratulations again to both clubs – as well as to all the champions of the other AFC competitions in 2014.

The celebration of the AFC's 60th Anniversary, held in conjunction with the 21st AFC Annual Awards at the end of the year, was truly magnificent. I am grateful for all the success Asia has had since the AFC's inception, and with the support from FIFA, I am sure there is more to come from Asian football.

Looking ahead to 2015, I believe that it will be a truly exciting year for us, with the AFC Asian Cup in Australia set to open the year in spectacular fashion. The continent's best 16 teams will challenge one another to lift Asia's most illustrious trophy, and I am personally eager to see which team comes out on top.

The competition is set to be one of our biggest ever sporting events. Millions of viewers across Asia, and millions more all over the world will be fully engaged in a passionate and lively footballing spectacle. I am confident Asia will not disappoint.

Regardless of the outcome, I am sure that all the teams competing in the AFC's flagship competition will represent Asia with pride and passion.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



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At the heart of the image



Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary



Dear friends,

The year 2014 has ended with a lot of wonderful football memories of the glorious ventures in international as well as continental football for Asian nations and clubs and it was given a spectacular closing with the AFC 60th Anniversary Celebration and 21st AFC Annual Awards.

The event in Manila showcased the AFC's magnificent journey since its formation in 1954, and with dignitaries from world football, AFC Hall of Fame legends and award winners in attendance; it was truly an event to remember.

We have chronicled the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup's splendid contest throughout 2014 in the pages of the past editions of this magazine; and we have the ultimate review of the drama in this edition as we look back at the triumphant finales for Western Sydney Wanderers and Al Qadsia.

In addition, we also have a great build-up to Asian football's flagship competition, the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, that will start on January 9.

There is an interview with one of Asia's most recognised modern footballing figures, Tim Cahill, as he shares his thoughts on the continent's greatest football competition, and the pride it brings to Australia as they host the event for the very first time.

We also feature Asia's Player of the Year, Nassir Al Shamrani, who will be hopeful that he can replicate his high standard of performance in 2014 on Asian football's biggest stage – and help three times Asian champions, Saudi Arabia, to a fourth victory.

Meanwhile, for an insight into what it means to win the competition, read the interview with Tsuneyasu Miyamoto, Japan's winning captain of the AFC Asian Cup's 2004 edition.

This issue will also profile all 16 teams and other competition related matters which you will definitely find useful.

The enthusiasm for the AFC Asian Cup is already being felt across Asia as we eagerly await the kick-off to 23 days of great footballing action – and you can begin that journey with us here.

Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary

Gallery





..... Top Of The Class

Saudi Arabia's Nassir Al Shamrani was named AFC Player of the Year at the end of November after helping Al Hilal to the final of the AFC Champions League as the continent's finest were recognised in Manila as the Asian Football Confederation celebrated its 60th anniversary at the AFC Awards gala in the Philippines.

Gallery

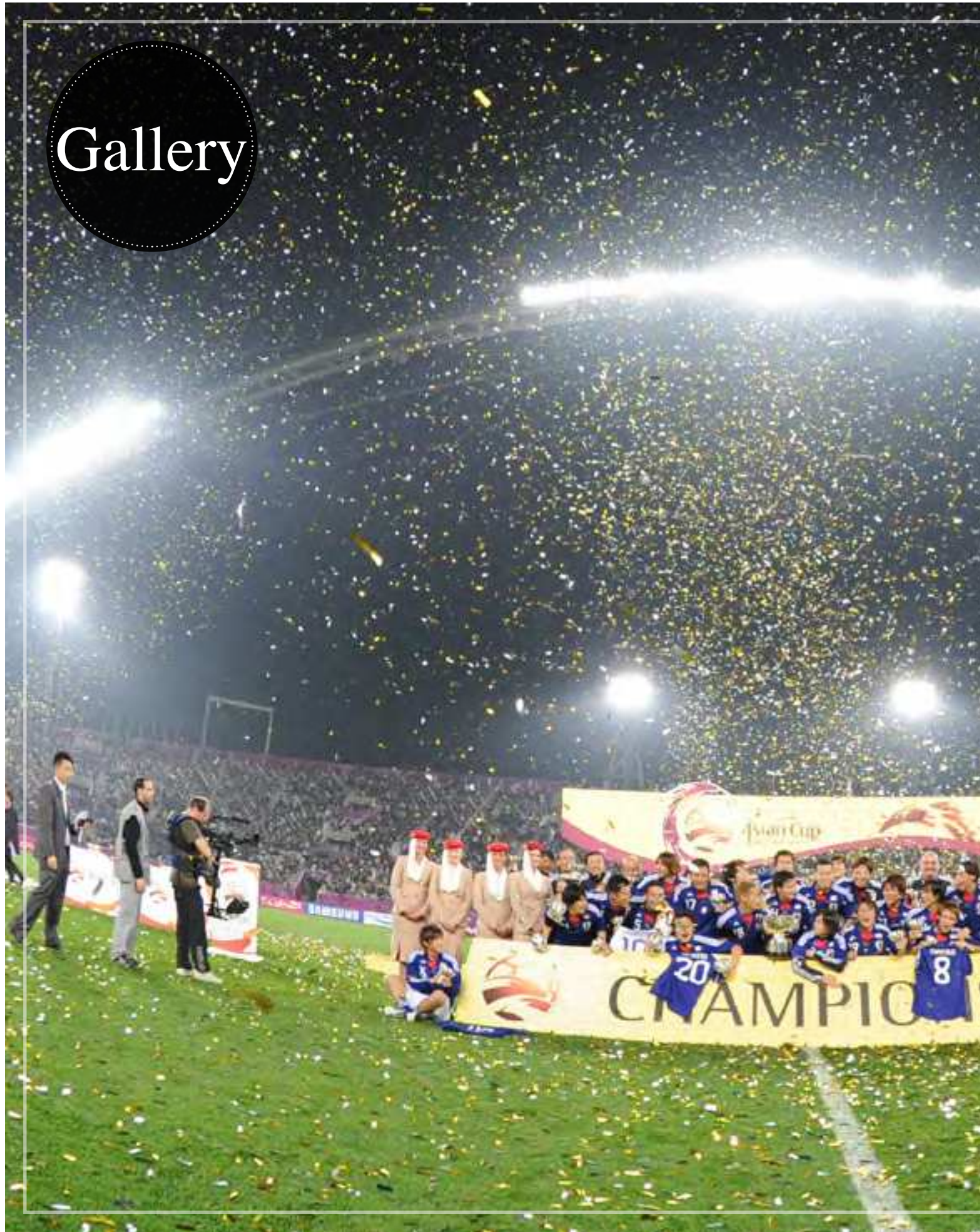




..... **Champions Of Asia**

Western Sydney Wanderers became the first Australian side to win the AFC Champions League after Tomi Juric's first-leg strike at Parramatta Stadium proved the difference against Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal as the continental debutants secured a 1-0 aggregate victory following a goalless draw in the second leg in Riyadh.

Gallery





.....
**Flashback:
AFC Asian Cup**
.....

Japan won a record fourth AFC Asian Cup title in Qatar in January 2011 as Tadanari Lee's extra time volley secured a 1-0 win over Australia in the final at Khalifa International Stadium in Doha.



Al Shamrani Crowned AFC Player Of The Year

AL HILAL AND SAUDI ARABIA STRIKER NASSIR AL SHAMRANI WAS NAMED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AHEAD OF UAE DEFENDER ISMAIL AHMED AND QATAR'S KHALFAN IBRAHIM AT NOVEMBER'S AFC ANNUAL AWARDS AND 60TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS IN MANILA.

Saudi Arabia's Nassir Al Shamrani was named AFC Player of the Year in November after helping Al Hilal reach the AFC Champions League final. Al Shamrani edged out Al Ain defender Ismail Ahmed and 2006 AFC Player of the Year Khalif Ibrahim who plays for Qatar side Al Sadd.

Top scorer or joint-top scorer in five of the past seven seasons in Saudi Arabia's top flight, Al Shamrani scored 10 goals as Al Hilal claimed a runners-up finish in the AFC Champions League.

"I am extremely proud of being named AFC Player of the Year; it's really a dream for each player to be the Player of the Year. I cannot really describe in words how happy and proud I am of receiving this great prize," said Al

Shamrani.

"When you are nominated with two other great players like Khalifan and Ismail who are competing with you for the prize, there were times when I was thinking I may or may not win, as they are very good players challenging with me."

Al Shamrani finished second on the top scorers chart for the AFC Champions League behind Ghana international Asamoah Gyan and the Al Ain striker was named AFC Foreign Player of the Year having netted 12 goals in the continental competition.

Australia captain Mile Jedinak, meanwhile, edged out compatriot Tim Cahill and Swansea City's Korea Republic international Ki Sung-yeung to be named the AFC International Player of the Year following his exploits in England with Crystal Palace.

Elsewhere, Ahmad Moein won the Men's

AFC Youth Player of the Year award having been named MVP as Qatar won the AFC U-19 Championship.

Finally, Katrina Gorry took away the AFC Women's Player of the Year award having helped Australia reach the final of the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup.

The Brisbane Roar and FC Kansas City midfielder saw off the stiff competition of two-time AFC Women's Player of the Year Aya Miyama and team-mate Nahomi Kawasumi, who both helped Japan win the AFC Women's Asian Cup after edging out Australia 1-0 in the final.

"I am absolutely ecstatic to win this award especially when up against such fantastic players in Aya Miyama and Nahomi Kawasumi. It really is an amazing honour after Kate Gill won this award in 2010," said Gorry.



Double Delight For ACL Winners Western Sydney

Australia's Western Sydney Wanderers were recognised for their historic AFC Champions League success after being named AFC Club of the

Year at November's AFC Annual Awards, while Tony Popovic took away the Men's AFC Coach of the Year accolade.

Continental debutants Western Sydney edged out Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal 1-0 on aggregate in the AFC Champions League final to become the first A-League side to win the title.

Former Australia international Popovic was able to mastermind that success despite Western Sydney only being founded in April 2012.

"It is a great feeling, a little bit surreal," said Popovic.

"It comes down to a little personal recognition, but it is difficult to accept as I feel like I am accepting it on

behalf of the club and definitely the playing group that has made this possible for me."

Asako Takemoto took away the Women's AFC Coach of the Year accolade having led Japan to success at the 2014 FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup.

Japan's U-17 side had earlier been confirmed as the Women's AFC National Team of the Year, with Hina Sugita named Women's AFC Youth Player of the Year.

Elsewhere, Palestine were recognised for their AFC Challenge Cup victory by being named the Men's AFC National Team of the Year.

"I do believe it is recognition by the AFC family that football in Palestine is developing and that the Palestinian football family is committed to promoting ethics and values in the game," said President of Palestinian Football Association General Jibril Rajoub.

AFC Diamond of Asia Junji Ogura

AFC Dream Asia Award Qatar

AFC Fair Play Association of the Year Korea Republic

AFC Futsal Team of the Year Japan

AFC Futsal Player of the Year Aliasghar Hassanzadeh

AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Women) Rita binti Gani

AFC Referee of the Year (Men) Ravshan Irmatov

AFC Referee of the Year (Women) Kim Kyoung-min

AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Men) Matthew Cream

AFC Inspiring Member Association Of The Year Japan

AFC Developing Member Association Of The Year DPR Korea

AFC Aspiring Member Association Of The Year Kyrgyzstan

AFC President Recognition Award For Grassroots Football

India/Philippines/Tajikistan

Familiar Foes For Western Sydney

Compatriots Brisbane Roar, who beat Western Sydney in the 2014 A-League Grand Final, will face 2007 champions Urawa Reds of Japan as well as K-League Classic side Suwon Bluewings and a play-off winner in Group G.

Defeated 4-2 on aggregate by Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in last year's semi-final, inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain from the United Arab



The eight outstanding places in the group stage of the 2014 AFC Champions League will be decided by the play-offs, which take place over four rounds at the start of February, with the first round of group stage fixtures taking place on February 24/25.

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Qatar 2022 Stadiums Unveiled



Qatar's preparations for hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup took a huge step forward at the end of 2014 with the designs for two stadiums unveiled.

The renovated design for the 40,000 capacity Khalifa International Stadium (pictured) was launched during the Gulf Cup in Saudi Arabia in November, while the plans for 40,000 capacity Qatar Foundation Stadium and Health & Wellness Precinct were unveiled on the fourth anniversary of Qatar winning the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Built in 1976, and renovated for the Asian Games in 2006, Khalifa International Stadium will undergo a comprehensive renovation to meet the FIFA World Cup stadium standards, which will include adding a new building to the east wing, and building a single roof to cover the whole seating area, having been also used during the 2011 AFC Asian Cup which took place in Doha.

Qatar Foundation Stadium and Health & Wellness Precinct, meanwhile, is expected to be completed in 2018 and will be open to communities offering health and medical clinics for adults

and children, male and female gymnasiums, swimming pool, tennis courts, football pitches, cycling and climbing. A range of restaurants and cafes will also be developed as part of the proposals.



Former Winners Eye AFC Cup

Three-time champions Kuwait Sports Club are out to extend their record haul of AFC Cup titles this year following December's group stage draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Kuwait SC, who won the title in 2009, 2012 and 2013, will face either Riffa or Manama from Bahrain, Nejme from Lebanon and one of four teams who advance from

the AFC Cup play-offs in Group D.

In total five teams will advance from the play-offs, with the two rounds taking place on February 10 and 17 ahead of the start of the group stage on 24/25 February.

Last year's runners-up Arbil of Iraq could face their opponents from the 2014 final in Group C should 2014 champions Al Qadsia from Kuwait fail to make it through the AFC Champions League play-offs.

Should Al Qadsia, who edged out Arbil on penalties in last year's final following a goalless draw, advance to the group stage of the AFC Champions League, compatriots Al Arabi will complete the Group C line-up alongside join newcomers FC Istiklol from Tajikistan and a team from the play-offs.

Elsewhere in the West, Group B will see Iraq champions Al Shorta take on debutants Taraji Wadi Al Nes from Palestine and Al Jazeera from Jordan in addition to a play-off winner.



Syrian side Al Wahda, though, will have to wait to learn their opponents in Group A with Jordan's Al Wehdat and Al Nahda of Oman both involved in the AFC Champions League play-offs.

Jordan's That Ras and Oman's Al Suwaiq are both potential replacements to join Al Wahda and a play-off winner in Group A.

Meanwhile in the East, 2014 semi-finalists Persipura Jayapura of Indonesia will face I-League champions Bengaluru FC, Warriors FC or Tampines Rovers of Singapore, along with a play-off winner in Group E.

Group G sees South China of Hong Kong, Malaysia's Pahang FA, Global FC from the Philippines and either Myanmar's Yadanarbon or Yangon United set to face off.

Hong Kong's Kitchee, who like Warriors and Yadanarbon will first compete in the play-offs for the AFC Champions

League, or alternates Sun Pegasus, make-up Group F alongside East Bengal of India, Singapore's Balestier Khalsa, and either Johor Darul Ta'zim or Selangor of Malaysia.

Finally, Group H contains either Persib Bandung or Arema Indonesia, Ayeyawady United from Myanmar, Lao FC from Laos and Maldivian side New Radiant.



| Group A | Group B | Group C | Group D | Group E | Group F | Group G | Group H |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Al Wehdat/That Ras (JOR) | Al Shorta (IRQ) | Al Qadsia/Al Arabi (KUW) | Riffa/Manama (BHR) | Bengaluru FC (IND) | Kitchee/ Sun Pegasus (HKG) | Yadanarbon/ Yangon United (MYA) | Persib Bandung/ Arema Indonesia (INA) |
| Al Nahda/Al Suwaiq (OMN) | Al Jazeera (JOR) | Arbil (IRQ) | Kuwait SC (KUW) | Persipura Jayapura (INA) | East Bengal (IND) | South China (HKG) | Ayeyawady United (MYA) |
| Al Wahda (SYR) | Taraji Wadi Al Nes (PLE) | FC Istiklol (TJK) | Nejme (LIB) | Warriors FC/ Tampines Rovers (SIN) | Johor Darul Ta'zim/ Selangor (MAS) | Global FC (PHI) | Lao FC (LAO) |
| Play-Off Winner | Play-Off Winner | Play-Off Winner | Play-Off Winner | Play-Off Winner | Balestier Khalsa (SIN) | Pahang FA (MAS) | New Radiant SC (MDV) |

ALL EYES ON AUSTRALIA

THE 16TH EDITION OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP WILL TAKE PLACE IN AUSTRALIA BETWEEN JANUARY 9-31 WITH SYDNEY, MELBOURNE, NEWCASTLE, CANBERRA AND BRISBANE PLAYING HOST TO THE 32 MATCHES.

Tadanari Lee's spectacular extra time volley four years ago in Qatar handed Japan a record fourth AFC Asian Cup crown, but this January, the slate is wiped clean as Asia's top 16 nations face off for the right to call themselves the winner of the continent's biggest prize.

Japan's win saw the Samurai Blue move ahead of both Iran and Saudi Arabia on the all-time AFC Asian Cup winners list.

And the continent's three most successful nations will be joined in Australia by the hosts as well as former champions Korea Republic, Kuwait and Iraq as well as Oman, Uzbekistan, China, DPR Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and Palestine.

Having lost to Lee's heartbreaking effort in the previous tournament, Australia will look to turn home advantage into a maiden AFC Asian

Cup title, with the Socceroos beginning their campaign in Group A against 2011 third-place finishers Korea Republic, Oman and 1980 champions Kuwait.

With only two sides advancing to the quarter-finals, Group B sees 2011 semi-finalists Uzbekistan take on Saudi Arabia, China and 2012 AFC Challenge Cup winners DPR Korea.

Iran headline Group C ahead of the United Arab Emirates, newly-crowned Gulf Cup champions Qatar and Bahrain.

And defending champions Japan will begin their title defence in Group D against Jordan, 2007 winners Iraq and 2014 AFC Challenge Cup winners Palestine, who were the final side to secure their place at the finals.

Hosts Australia will have the honour of opening the tournament against Kuwait at Melbourne Rectangular Stadium on January 9, with the championship culminating 22 days later at Stadium Australia in Sydney where the winner of the continent's most coveted prize will be crowned.





Group A

| | |
|----|----------------|
| A1 | AUSTRALIA |
| A2 | KOREA REPUBLIC |
| A3 | OMAN |
| A4 | KUWAIT |

Group B

| | |
|----|--------------|
| B1 | UZBEKISTAN |
| B2 | SAUDI ARABIA |
| B3 | CHINA |
| B4 | DPR KOREA |

Group C

| | |
|----|---------|
| C1 | IRAN |
| C2 | UAE |
| C3 | QATAR |
| C4 | BAHRAIN |

Group D

| | |
|----|-----------|
| D1 | JAPAN |
| D2 | JORDAN |
| D3 | IRAQ |
| D4 | PALESTINE |

Group A

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| AUSTRALIA VS KUWAIT Fri 9 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE | KOREA REPUBLIC VS OMAN Sat 10 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA | KUWAIT VS KOREA REPUBLIC Tue 13 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA |
| OMAN VS AUSTRALIA Tue 13 Jan Stadium Australia SYDNEY | AUSTRALIA VS KOREA REPUBLIC Sat 17 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | OMAN VS KUWAIT Sat 17 Jan Newcastle Stadium NEWCASTLE |

Group B

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| UZBEKISTAN VS DPR KOREA Sat 10 Jan Stadium Australia SYDNEY | SAUDI ARABIA VS CHINA Sat 10 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | DPR KOREA VS SAUDI ARABIA Wed 14 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE |
| CHINA VS UZBEKISTAN Wed 14 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | UZBEKISTAN VS SAUDI ARABIA Sun 18 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE | CHINA VS DPR KOREA Sun 18 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA |

Group C

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| IRAN VS BAHRAIN Sun 11 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE | UAE VS QATAR Sun 11 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA | BAHRAIN VS UAE Thu 15 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA |
| QATAR VS IRAN Thu 15 Jan Stadium Australia SYDNEY | IRAN VS UAE Mon 19 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | QATAR VS BAHRAIN Mon 19 Jan Stadium Australia SYDNEY |

Group D

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| JAPAN VS PALESTINE Mon 12 Jan Newcastle Stadium NEWCASTLE | JORDAN VS IRAQ Mon 12 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | PALESTINE VS JORDAN Fri 16 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE |
| IRAQ VS JAPAN Fri 16 Jan Brisbane Stadium BRISBANE | JAPAN VS JORDAN Tue 20 Jan Melbourne Rectangular Stadium MELBOURNE | IRAQ VS PALESTINE Tue 20 Jan Canberra Stadium CANBERRA |

Quarter Final 1

1ST GROUP A
VS
2ND GROUP B

Thu 22 Jan
Melbourne Rectangular Stadium
MELBOURNE

Quarter Final 2

1ST GROUP B
VS
2ND GROUP A

Thu 22 Jan
Brisbane Stadium
BRISBANE

Quarter Final 3

1ST GROUP C
VS
2ND GROUP D

Fri 23 Jan
Canberra Stadium
CANBERRA

Quarter Final 4

1ST GROUP D
VS
2ND GROUP C

Fri 23 Jan
Stadium Australia
SYDNEY

Semi Final 1

WINNER QF1
VS
WINNER QF3

Mon 26 Jan
Stadium Australia
SYDNEY

Semi Final 2

WINNER QF2
VS
WINNER QF4

Tue 27 Jan
Newcastle Stadium
NEWCASTLE

FINAL



Sat 31 Jan
Stadium Australia
SYDNEY

Third Place

Loser SF1
VS
Loser SF2

Fri 30 Jan
Newcastle Stadium
NEWCASTLE



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GROUP A

AUSTRALIA



Key Player

Tim Cahill

Despite the regeneration process witnessed under coach Ange Postecoglou, Tim Cahill remains Australia's talisman despite turning 35 in December.

The former Everton striker, who now plies his trade in the United States with New York Red Bulls, underlined his importance to Australia at the 2014 FIFA World Cup

- which represented his third appearance at the tournament - with Cahill netting one of the goals of the tournament against the Netherlands, while he was also on target against Chile in Brazil.

Blessed with a remarkable aerial ability and an equally eye-catching level of skill on the ground, Cahill is Australia's all-time leading goal scorer.



Hosts Australia will look to build on reaching the final of the last AFC Asian Cup in Qatar as well as an encouraging showing at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil to land a maiden continental title on home soil in January.

Last time out in Qatar in 2011 having only joined the AFC in January 2006, Australia progressed from reaching the quarter-finals on their AFC Asian Cup debut in 2007 only to lose the final 1-0 to Japan after the Socceroos conceded a heartbreaking extra-time goal in Doha.

That runner-up finish in Qatar was achieved under Holger Osieck, although despite the German coach also securing qualification for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, he was replaced by Ange Postecoglou following a run of disappointing results prior to the tournament in Brazil.

Postecoglou quickly sought to make his mark on an ageing squad who had made hard work of their FIFA World Cup qualification campaign, with veteran goalkeeper and

Record: Runner-Up 2011; Quarter-Finals 2007

Qualified as: Hosts/2011 Runner-Up

Australia's most capped player Mark Schwarzer announcing his retirement within hours of his appointment while former AFC Player of the Year Sasa Ogrenovski and ex-captain Lucas Neill were squeezed out of the squad.

Australia did eventually lose all three games to Chile, the Netherlands and Spain in Brazil, but Postecoglou's side left South America with their heads held high.

Defender Matthew Spiranovic and midfielder Mathew Leckie emerged as Australia's standout performers in Brazil alongside the evergreen Tim Cahill, who netted a spectacular strike in the hard-fought 3-2 defeat by the Netherlands.

Postecoglou's commitment to youth and regeneration is a long term vision with the qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup also beginning in mid-2015 with the likes of Chris Herd, Trent Sainsbury, Bailey Wright, Brad Smith and Massimo Luongo handed the chance to impress after Brazil.

Coach

Ange Postecoglou

Former Brisbane Roar and Melbourne Victory coach Ange Postecoglou

replaced German Holger Osieck as Australia coach in October 2013.

And Postecoglou, who represented the Socceroos four times as a player, quickly revamped the side ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup after being handed a five-year contract.

Postecoglou had earned his chance having led Brisbane to back-to-back A-League titles in 2011 and 2012.

He had began his coaching career by leading South Melbourne to the National Soccer League title in 1998 and 1999. And after taking over the Australia youth set-up, Postecoglou spent nine months with Greek second division side Panachaiki in 2008.



The Asahi Shimbun AJW

KEEPING AN EYE ON ASIA AND JAPAN



The Asahi Shimbun AJW (Asia & Japan Watch)

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The site features quality content unique to The Asahi Shimbun, including analysis and investigative articles, opinion pieces by Asahi reporters and outside experts, and other reports aimed at a global readership.

The Asahi Shimbun has a circulation of nearly 8 million. The newspaper prides itself on its investigative reporting and analyses of business and political coverage, as well as insightful stories on Japan's fascinating subculture.

AJW offers unparalleled coverage of the Fukushima nuclear plant accident. The coverage has received positive feedback from many experts around the world.

The site also runs selected articles from The Asahi Shimbun GLOBE.

Subscription Plans

To commemorate the site's launch, a special discount rate of \$11.96 (one month) is available. For further inquiries, email Customer Support (customer-support@asahi.com).

GROUP A

KOREA REPUBLIC



Key Player

Ki Sung-yueng

Having studied in Australia, Ki Sung-yueng started his career with Korea Republic's FC Seoul before joining Scottish side Celtic in January 2010.

Ki won a bronze medal with Korea at the 2012 Olympic Games before joining English Premier League side Swansea City in a deal that broke the club's transfer record in August that year.

The 25-year-old central midfielder spent the 2013/14 season on loan at Sunderland, but signed a new four-year contract to secure his immediate future with Swansea in August 2014.

Ki featured prominently for Korea at both the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cups as well as in the Taeguk Warriors' run to the semi-finals at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar.



Coach

Uli Stielike

German Uli Stielike replaced Korea Republic legend Hong Myung-bo

following the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

As a player, former midfielder Stielike played 42 times for West Germany and won the 1980 UEFA European Championship. He also won three Bundesliga titles, one German Cup and one UEFA Cup with Borussia Mönchengladbach before joining Real Madrid. With the Spanish side, Stielike won a further three domestic titles, two Spanish Cups and another UEFA Cup before ending his career in Switzerland.

As a coach, Stielike has previously taken charge of Switzerland and the Ivory Coast, while also working with clubs in Switzerland, Qatar, Germany and Spain.

Korea Republic will make a record-equaling 13th appearance at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 following back-to-back third place finishes at the previous two editions in 2007 and 2011.

Having also participated in every FIFA World Cup since 1986, Korea's standing as one of Asia's powerhouses is unquestionable, although their wait for an elusive third continental title is one of frustration for the Taeguk Warriors, who won the first two editions of the AFC Asian Cup in 1956 and 1960.

Since then, however, Korea have lost three finals in 1972, 1980, 1988 while finishing third on four occasions, including at three of the last four editions in 2000, 2007 and 2011.

Much was expected of the Korea side which travelled to Qatar for the 2011 edition, and they posted an unbeaten group stage record before meeting familiar foes Iran in the quarter-finals – for the fifth tournament in a row – and prevailing by a single goal.

But Korea lost a thrilling semi-final on penalties to Japan following a 2-2 draw after

Record: Champion 1956, 1960; Runner-Up 1972, 1980, 1988; Third Place 1964, 2000, 2007, 2011; Quarter-Finals 1996, 2004; Group Stage 1984

Qualified as: Third Place 2011

extra-time and eventually were forced to settle for another third place finish after edging out Uzbekistan 3-2, which earned them automatic qualification for the 2015 edition.

National icon Hong Myung-bo, who had led Korea to a bronze medal at the 2012 Olympic Games, was expected to be in charge in Australia, but following a disappointing 2014 FIFA World Cup when the Taeguk Warriors lost 4-2 to Algeria and 1-0 to Belgium having drawn their opening game 1-1 with Russia to suffer a premature elimination from the finals in the group stage, he stepped down and was replaced by German coach Uli Stielike.

Like his predecessor, former Switzerland and Ivory Coast boss Stielike will be able to draw from a squad of players who are increasingly plying their trades in top leagues overseas, particularly in the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as closer to home in Japan and China.

GROUP A

OMAN



Key Player

Ali Al Habsi

Goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi currently plays in England with Wigan Athletic having been part of the squad which won the 2013 FA Cup.

A former fireman at Muscat's International Airport, Al Habsi first moved to Europe in 2003 when he joined Norway's Lyn Oslo before eventually transferring to England with Bolton Wanderers and then Wigan.

At international level, the 33-year-old has already played at the AFC Asian Cup in both 2004 and 2007 while he helped Oman win the Gulf Cup in 2009.

Al Habsi missed the majority of the recent AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign after undergoing shoulder surgery in 2013, but returned for the 2014 Gulf Cup and helped Oman finish fourth.



Coach

Paul Le Guen

Frenchman Paul Le Guen enjoyed a successful career as a player in his

hometown and captained Paris Saint-Germain while also winning 17 caps for France.

After turning to coaching following his playing career, Le Guen enjoyed spells with Rennes, Lyon, Rangers in Scotland and Paris Saint-Germain before guiding Cameroon to the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. During his time with Lyon, Le Guen won three consecutive Ligue 1 titles.

Le Guen was appointed Oman coach in June 2011 and oversaw their progress to the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and successful AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 qualifying campaign.

man secured a return to the AFC Asian Cup for a third time after advancing from Group A of the qualifiers with two games to spare before reaching the semi-finals at the 2014 Gulf Cup in

November.

Having missed the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, Oman built on an impressive showing in the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup to add to their AFC Asian Cup appearances in 2004 and 2007 by completing an unbeaten qualification record to highlight the recent progress under French coach Paul Le Guen.

Oman, though, did fall short of matching their 2009 Gulf Cup success as Le Guen's side lost their 2014 semi-final 3-1 to Qatar having won their group with an unbeaten record before losing 1-0 to the United Arab Emirates in the third place play-off.

Oman first qualified for the AFC Asian Cup under Czech coach Milan Macala in 2004, and despite losing 1-0 to Japan, drew with Iran and beat Thailand to narrowly miss out on a place

Record: Group Stage 2004, 2007

Qualified as: Group A Winners

in the knockout stage.

They returned to the AFC Asian Cup three years later and again proved themselves on the continental stage by drawing with both Australia and eventual champions Iraq.

And just two years later, Oman were celebrating as a penalty from captain Mohamed Rabia secured a 6-5 penalty shootout victory over Saudi Arabia in the final of the 2009 Gulf Cup.

Oman's U-23 side then agonisingly missed out on securing a historic place in the football tournament for the 2012 Olympic Games.

All of this was achieved despite Oman only replacing their amateur domestic set-up in 2013 - Ali Al Habsi and Ahmad Al Hosni were the only players with overseas experience - and further progress was achieved as Le Guen's side reached the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, narrowly missing out on a play-off berth.

GROUP A

KUWAIT



Key Player

Yousef Naser

Striker Yousef Naser scored three goals in five games as Kuwait qualified for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Naser, who played for Kuwait at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, scored twice in the 3-1 win over Thailand on the penultimate Matchday which secured their passage to Australia having earlier found the net in the draw with Lebanon.

Naser was also part of the Kuwait squad that won the Gulf Cup in 2010, with the striker scoring the only goal in the win over Qatar during the group stage.

The 24-year-old striker, who also helped Kuwait win the WAFF Championship in 2010, previously played in the United Arab Emirates with Ajman before rejoining Kuwaiti Premier League club Kazma.



Kuwait possess a rich history in the AFC Asian Cup having lifted the title in 1980, while also boasting a runner-up finish and third place during a golden period which also included their only appearance at the FIFA World Cup in 1982.

And while they lost all three games to China, Uzbekistan and Qatar at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup to exit in the group stage for the second consecutive tournament having failed to qualify at all in 2007, three successive wins for clubs from Kuwait in the AFC Cup, with Al Qadsia claiming the most recent title in 2014, has raised hopes for the 1976 runners-up.

A group stage exit at the 2014 Gulf Cup, though, did see 2007 AFC Asian Cup-winning coach Jorvan Vieira depart after Kuwait suffered a 5-0 defeat by Oman having earlier edged Iraq 1-0 and shared a 2-2 draw with the United Arab Emirates.

Having made their debut AFC Asian Cup appearance in 1972, Kuwait made it all the way to the final four years later only to lose 1-0 to Central Asian powerhouse Iran.

Record: Champion 1980; Runner-Up 1976; Third Place 1984; Fourth Place 1996; Quarter-Finals 2000; Group Stage 1972, 1988, 2004, 2011

Qualified as: Group B Runner-Up

But on home soil four years later, Kuwait gained revenge for their 1976 final defeat with a 2-1 win over Iran in the semi-finals before beating Korea Republic 3-0 in the final thanks to two goals from Faisal Al Dakhil after Saad Al Hutti had opened the scoring.

Their only appearance at the FIFA World Cup soon arrived in 1982 as Kuwait drew with Czechoslovakia in their opener before losing to France and England to finish at the foot of the table.

That golden period continued into the 1984 AFC Asian Cup as Kuwait claimed third place after edging out Iran 5-3 on penalties following a 1-1 draw.

Knockout stage appearances continued in 1996 with a fourth place finish and a place amongst the last eight in 2000, but despite winning the Gulf Cup and WAFF Championship in 2010, Kuwait have not progressed beyond the group stage at the AFC Asian Cup since.

Coach

Nabil Maaloul

Tunisian coach Nabil Maaloul joined the 1980 AFC Asian Cup

champions in early December after taking over from predecessor Jorvan Vieira following Kuwait's disappointing Gulf Cup campaign in Saudi Arabia in November.

Prior to his new role, Maaloul led El Jaish to a runners-up finish in the 2013/14 Qatar Stars League. The bulk of his previous managerial experience has been in his native land with two spells at Esperance de Tunis and a brief tenure as Tunisia's national team coach.

During his playing career, Maaloul turned out for Esperance de Tunis, Hannover 96 in Germany and Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli.

GROUP B

UZBEKISTAN



Key Player

Odil Ahmedov

Midfielder Odil Ahmedov starred for Uzbekistan at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup and subsequently joined Russia's Anzhi Makhachkala initially on loan from Pakhtakor soon after the tournament in Qatar.

Ahmedov was ever-present for Uzbekistan at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, and scored twice while also featuring at centre-back due

to injuries. And Ahmedov, who had won back-to-back Uzbek League titles with Pakhtakor in 2006 and 2007, was named Anzhi Player of the Year in 2011 ahead of Samuel Eto'o before joining Krasnodar in June 2014.

He also featured prominently as Uzbekistan reached the play-off for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.



Uzbekistan recovered from again losing in the 2014 FIFA World Cup play-offs by qualifying for a sixth consecutive AFC Asian Cup appearance alongside the United Arab Emirates from Group E.

The Central Asian nation have now qualified for every edition of the tournament since gaining independence from the USSR and in Qatar 2011 Uzbekistan reached the semi-finals for the first time following back-to-back quarter-final appearances in 2004 and 2007.

Uzbekistan eventually lost that semi-final 6-0 to Australia before being edged out 3-2 by Korea Republic in the third place play-off, but their campaign highlighted their rise to the upper echelon of Asian football.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan eventually played their first match in June 1992 and shared a 2-2 draw with Tajikistan before, just two years later, winning all seven games at the 1994 Asian Games to claim the gold medal.

A first AFC Asian Cup appearance would soon follow in 1996, although Uzbekistan

Record: Semi-Finals 2011; Quarter-Finals 2004, 2007; Group Stage 1996, 2000

Qualified as: Group E Runner-Up

agonisingly missed out on a place in the quarter-finals after finishing in a three-way tie with China and Syria.

Four years later in Lebanon, Uzbekistan lost to Japan and Saudi Arabia having shared a 1-1 draw with Qatar in their opening game to again miss out on progressing to the knockout stages after finishing at the foot of the table.

Uzbekistan, though, reached the quarter-finals for the first time in 2004 before being edged out 4-3 on penalties by Bahrain following a thrilling 2-2 draw after extra-time.

And after losing to Saudi Arabia at the same stage three years later, Uzbekistan finally underlined their status as a regional force by ending their quarter-final hoodoo with a 2-1 win over Jordan.

A 6-0 defeat by Australia in the semi-finals, though, ended their campaign and Uzbekistan eventually finished fourth after losing the third place play-off to Korea Republic.

Coach

Mirdjalal Kasimov

Mirdjalal Kasimov was re-appointed as coach in June 2012 with the

former midfielder also initially remaining in charge of Bunyodkor.

As a player, four-time Uzbekistan Player of the Year Kasimov won the 1987 FIFA U-16 World Championship and 1988 UEFA European U-18 Championship with the USSR before being named the best midfielder at the 1994 Asian Games as Uzbekistan claimed the gold medal.

He also won the Russian League title with Alania Vladikavkaz in 1995 as well as the Uzbek League title in 1998 and 2003 with Pakhtakor. As a coach, Kasimov won three Uzbekistan titles with Bunyodkor but stepped down from his dual role in 2014.

GROUP B

SAUDI ARABIA



Key Player

Nassir Al Shamrani

Nassir Al Shamrani was named AFC Player of the Year after scoring 10 goals in 11 games as Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal reached the 2014 AFC Champions League final.

Having progressed through the ranks at Mecca-based side Al Wehda, Al Shamrani initially joined Al Shabab on loan in 2006 before making his move permanent the

following year.

And he continued his prolific form by topping the goalscoring charts in four of the next five seasons including in 2011/2012 as Al Shabab won the Saudi League title thanks to 21 goals from the striker.

Al Shamrani made the switch to Al Hilal in June 2013 and averaged just over a goal a game in the 2013/14 Saudi League season.



Gulf Cup finalists and three-time AFC Asian Cup champions Saudi Arabia secured their ninth consecutive finals appearance with two games to spare as the Green Falcons cruised into the continental championship as undefeated winners of Group C.

With six final appearances in the eight tournaments, Saudi Arabia are one of the undisputed powerhouses in Asian football, although seven editions of the AFC Asian Cup took place before Saudi Arabia made their first appearance at the 1984 event.

But it took them little time to stamp their mark on the championship as Saudi Arabia went on an undefeated run in Singapore in 1984 to claim the title.

And four years later in Qatar, Saudi Arabia repeated their efforts after defeating Korea Republic in the final to lift a second consecutive title.

But any hopes Saudi Arabia may have had of replicating Iran's record of three consecutive AFC Asian Cup titles fell short in the final of the

Record: Champion 1984, 1988, 1996; Runner-Up 1992, 2000, 2007; Group Stage 2004, 2011

Qualified as: Group C Winner

1992 tournament, though, as they were beaten by hosts Japan.

In 1996 the trophy did return to Saudi Arabia, but four years later Japan again prevented them from defending their title by coming out on top in the final in Lebanon.

A disappointing performance in the 2004 tournament saw Saudi Arabia not only fail to reach the final for the first time but also fail to progress beyond the group stages.

And while the Middle East nation did return to the final in 2007, this time they would finish runner-up to Iraq's fairytale surge to the title.

However, Saudi Arabia's AFC Asian Cup low point was to come in 2011 as the side were eliminated in the group stage after three consecutive defeats.

In recent times, though, Saudi Arabia have seen an upturn in performances with a flawless qualification for Australia followed up by a runners-up finish at the 2014 Gulf Cup.

Coach

Cosmin Olariu

Taking over the Saudi Arabia helm from Juan Ramon Lopez Caro in December,

experienced Romanian coach Cosmin Olariu has enjoyed great success in the Gulf region since first joining Saudi giants Al Hilal in 2007.

He led Al Hilal to the Saudi League title and the Saudi Crown Prince Cup, before taking over at Al Sadd and winning the Qatar Stars Cup in 2010.

The 45-year-old then joined Al Ain in the UAE and led them to back-to-back league titles as well, before joining fellow Emirati club Al Ahli ahead of the 2013/14 season.

With Al Ahli, Olariu enjoyed another successful season and won three domestic titles and he was named the league's Coach of the Year in 2014.

GROUP B

CHINA



Key Player

Zheng Zhi

Zheng Zhi captained Guangzhou Evergrande to their 2013 AFC Champions League final success having returned to China in mid-2010 while the club were still in the second division after stints in England with Charlton Athletic and in Scotland with Celtic.

Named AFC Player of the Year in 2013 Zheng, who is far more effective in a central

midfield role but can also be deployed at centre-back, had made his name helping Shandong Luneng win the domestic double in 2006 having landed the title two years earlier with Shenzhen Jianlibao.

He helped China reach the 2004 AFC Asian Cup final when his nation hosted the event, but after also featuring in 2007, Zheng missed the 2011 finals.



Two-time finalists China have endured a modest recent record at the AFC Asian Cup, although hopes are high of a return to former glories under Frenchman Alain Perrin after seeds of expectation were planted following Guangzhou Evergrande's historic AFC Champions League success at the end of 2013.

China have only failed to reach the knockout stage three times since their impressive debut in 1976 where they finished third, although two of those group stage exits have arrived at the previous two editions in 2007 and 2011.

And hopes of ending that run were in serious doubt as China, with Perrin in the dugout for his first game in charge having taken over from former Spain coach Jose Antonio Camacho, were on the verge of failing to qualify after falling 3-0 behind against Iraq on the final Matchday.

But with second-half substitute Zhang Xizhe netting a consolation penalty with 17 minutes remaining, China qualified as the best third place finisher after edging out Lebanon on goal difference.

Record: Runner-up 1984, 2004; Third Place 1976, 1992; Fourth Place 1988, 2000, Quarter-Finals 1996; Group Stage 1980, 2007, 2011

Qualified as: Best Third Place Finisher

After their third place in 1976, China made it to the final in 1984 only to lose 2-0 to Saudi Arabia.

A penalty shootout defeat to Iran meant China had to settle for fourth when Qatar hosted the 1988 AFC Asian Cup before they finished third in 1992, reached the last eight in 1996 and made the semi-finals in 2000 in Lebanon.

Much was expected of the side when China hosted the continental competition in 2004 and they made it all the way to the final only to lose 3-1 to Japan before successive group stage failures in the Asian Cup finals in 2007 and 2011.

Last time out in Qatar, China narrowly missed out on a place in the quarter-finals after sharing a 2-2 draw with eventual semi-finalists Uzbekistan on the final Matchday having earlier beaten Kuwait 2-0 but lost by the same scoreline to hosts Qatar.

Coach

Alain Perrin

Frenchman Alain Perrin succeeded Jose Antonio Camacho as China coach in

February and oversaw their dramatic qualification for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 with the crucial 3-1 defeat by Iraq his first game in charge at the end of the qualifying campaign.

Perrin made his name as a coach in France after leading Troyes from the fourth tier to the top-flight before spells with Marseille and Lyon.

He won the league and cup double with Lyon in 2008, either side of a short stint with English Premier League side Portsmouth.

The role with China is his first full national team role having most recently spent four seasons in Qatar with Umm Salal, Al Gharafa and Al Khor.

GROUP B

DPR KOREA



Key Player

RI MYONG-GUK

Ri Myong-guk has been DPR Korea's first-choice goalkeeper since the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifiers in 2007 when the custodian featured against Mongolia.

He was shortlisted for the AFC Player of the Year award in 2009 before featuring at the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the 2011 AFC Asian Cup and the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup

– which DPR Korea won to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Both his father and uncle have played as goalkeepers for the national team, and Ri, now 28, is one of the most experienced players in the squad and he was one of the three over-age players at the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon where DPR Korea claimed the silver medal.



Coach

Jo Tong-sop

Former international Jo Tong-sop took over as DPR Korea coach for a second time a

month before the start of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

During first spell in charge, Jo guided DPR Korea to the 2010 AFC Challenge Cup title, which secured qualification for the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, before being replaced by Yun Jong-su following their group stage elimination in Qatar after losing to Iran and Iraq.

Jo has also been heavily involved in the development squads after guiding DPR Korea to the 2006 AFC U-19 Championship title and an appearance at the 2007 FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Most recently, Jo took DPR Korea's Rimyongsu Club to the final of the 2014 AFC President's Cup in Sri Lanka.

DPR Korea secured passage to the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 following their victory at the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup.

The 2-1 victory over Turkmenistan saw the Chollima successfully retain

the title they first won in 2010 after beating the same opponents on penalties which also earned DPR Korea their place at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup.

DPR Korea failed to progress beyond the group stage in Qatar four years ago, as they had done on their previous appearance at the finals in 1992, after losing to Iran and Iraq by single goals having shared a goalless draw with the United Arab Emirates.

With the legendary side of the 1966 FIFA World Cup, which eliminated Italy en route to a quarter-final finish, still casting an understandably long shadow as the first Asian side to advance so far at a FIFA World Cup, DPR Korea also reached the quarter-finals of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal

But their 2012 AFC Challenge Cup victory did secure a return to the competition that

Record: Fourth Place 1980; Group Stage 1992, 2011

Qualified as: 2012 AFC Challenge Cup winners

hosted one of their most celebrated continental campaigns: the 1980 AFC Asian Cup.

The 1980 finals, hosted by Kuwait, saw DPR Korea draw from the squad which achieved such success in Canada four years prior and they negotiated their way through a tough group by claiming wins over Bangladesh, China and Syria while only losing to Iran.

DPR Korea did eventually lose their semi-final with Korea Republic 2-1 before being forced to settle for a highly credible fourth place finish after losing 3-0 to Iran.

An appearance at the 2010 FIFA World Cup highlighted DPR Korea's development in recent times as well as continued success at AFC youth championships.

And the current line-up boasts several attacking threats that can punish teams with Suwon Bluewings targetman Jong Tae-se and national team strike-partner Hong Yong-jo key components to the side.

GROUP C

IRAN



Key Player

Javad Nekounam

Veteran midfielder and Team Melli captain Javad Nekounam remains the cornerstone of the side, controlling everything from the centre of the pitch and chipping in regularly with vital goals.

Set to compete in his fourth AFC Asian Cup in 2015 and nearing 150 international caps, Nekounam has been one of Iran's stars for over a decade.

After six years in La Liga with Osasuna from 2006-2012, Nekounam returned to his homeland with Esteghlal in Iran and helped the Tehran-based side win the league title in 2012/2013.

Having enjoyed a brief spell with Kuwait Sports Club, the 34-year-old then returned to Osasuna in 2014 after a strong 2014 FIFA World Cup campaign.



Always ever-present at the AFC Asian Cup since they hosting the tournament in 1968, three-time champions Iran secured a record-equalling 13th appearance at the continental championship by topping qualifying Group B with a game to spare ahead of Kuwait, Lebanon and Thailand.

And along with being near ever-presents at the continental championships, Iran can boast title-winning campaigns in three consecutive tournaments in 1968, 1972 and 1976.

The first title came in their debut appearance at the AFC Asian Cup in 1968 as the hosts won the trophy convincingly with a perfect record following four wins.

Four years later in Thailand, the defending champions progressed to the final with a 100% record before defeating two-time winners Korea Republic 2-1 after extra time.

In 1976, the tournament was again hosted by Iran and the home nation performed even better as Team Melli claimed a third title in a row with a perfect record without conceding a goal.

Record: Champion 1968, 1972, 1976; Third Place 1980, 1988, 1996, 2004; Fourth Place 1984; Quarter-Finals 2000, 2007, 2011; Group Stage 1992

Qualified as: Group B Winner

Since those glory years, though, Iran have been unable to match those continental achievements after losing in the AFC Asian Cup semi-finals on five separate occasions.

Hopes of a fourth consecutive title were ended in the semi-finals of the 1980 tournament before further final four disappointments followed in 1984, 1988, 1996 and 2004.

The last two editions of the AFC Asian Cup followed similar narratives as on both occasions Korea Republic proved their undoing after inflicting consecutive quarter-final defeats.

Skipped by evergreen Javad Nekounam who is nearing 150 caps, Iran also boast exciting attacking talents Ashkan Dejagah and Reza Ghoochannejhad, who have flourished under Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz.

And an encouraging performance at the 2014 FIFA World Cup has further raised hopes that Team Melli will enjoy a successful AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 campaign.

Coach

Carlos Queiroz

Vastly experienced Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz took over the Iran hot seat in

2011 and guided Team Melli to the FIFA 2014 World Cup, which represented his third time appearing at the tournament after successfully leading South Africa and Portugal to the 2002 and 2010 editions.

As well as Iran's encouraging performances in Brazil, Queiroz is largely credited with bringing in players from the Iranian diaspora after giving Team Melli debuts to exciting talents Ashkan Dejagah and Reza Ghoochannejhad.

Queiroz has also famously worked in management at some of the world's most prestigious clubs after with spells at Spain's Real Madrid and England's Manchester United.

GROUP C

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



Key Player

Omar Abdulrahman

Highly-rated playmaker Omar Abdulrahman is one of Asia's undisputed stars and among the most exciting young talents in world football.

While a threat on goal in his own right, the 23-year-old is best known for his skills as a provider and over the 2013/14 UAE domestic season Abdulrahman was ranked first in assists with 23 for club side Al Ain.

The Emirati schemer is equally adept as an attacking midfielder where his creative talents can come to the fore or as a wide forward allowing him to come inside on his favoured right foot.

Abdulrahman was named MVP at the 2013 Gulf Cup having played a starring role at the 2012 Olympic Games the previous year in London.



The United Arab Emirates will be seeking to go one better than their current best performance at the AFC Asian Cup – a runners-up finish in 1996 – when they kick-off in Australia hoping to finally claim the continental title.

And, if their impressive, undefeated progress through qualifying is anything to go by, then the Emirati side have the potential to go far, and the ability to prove a match for any team they face at the 2015 finals.

Mahdi Ali's young side will be desperate to continue their progress and emulate, or even better, the performance of the golden generation that 18 years ago went all the way to the AFC Asian Cup final.

Then under the tutelage of Croatian coach Tomislav Ivic, the UAE reached the final of the 1996 tournament on home soil only to lose to Saudi Arabia on penalties.

Four years earlier, the UAE had reached the semi-finals, but otherwise the Emirates have a modest record at the AFC Asian Cup. First qualifying in 1980, in all but 1992 and 1996 the team failed to progress beyond the group

Record: Runner-Up 1996; Fourth Place 1992; Group Stage 1980, 1984, 1988, 2004, 2007, 2011

Qualified as: Group E Winner

stage.

The current squad, however, looks set to restore the glory days after local coach Ali steered his youthful charges to victory at the Gulf Cup at the start of 2013, the second time the country has won the regional tournament after previously claiming the trophy in 2006.

Although they were unable to defend their Gulf Cup title in November, after losing in the semi-finals to Saudi Arabia, the side did secure third place after defeating Oman in the play-off.

The team, led by Emirati coach Ali who has been heavily involved in the development of much of their new generation, brims with attacking talent from the creative fulcrum of the team that is superstar midfielder and playmaker Omar Abdulrahman to the twin threats up front in the form of the prolific Ali Mabkhout, joint top scorer in qualifying for Australia 2015 and top scorer at the 2014 Gulf Cup, and former AFC Young Player of the Year Ahmed Khalil.

Coach

Mahdi Ali

Mahdi Ali has been a central figure in UAE football development,

coaching the U-16, U-19 and U-20 sides prior to leading the U-23 national team to the 2012 Olympic Games.

And despite being knocked out in the group stage in London, Ali was promoted to coach of the senior national team shortly after the tournament finished.

He then led the UAE to their ninth AFC Asian Cup appearance after his side remained undefeated throughout the six qualification matches.

In addition to his spells with different levels of the national team, Ali coached domestic side Al Ahli having played for the same club for 15 years during his playing career.

GROUP C

QATAR



Key Player

Khalfan Ibrahim

Khalfan Ibrahim was named AFC Player of the Year in 2006 at the age of just 18-years-old after impressing at the 2005 FIFA U-17 World Cup and the 2006 Asian Games where he was part of Qatar's gold-medal winning side.

And since making his debut for the senior national team in 2006, Ibrahim has been a key fixture in the starting line-up and he

scored the only goal in October's friendly against Australia that gave Qatar a historic first-ever win over the Socceroos.

With club side Al Sadd, the 26-year-old forward has won a plethora of silverware including four league titles as well as the 2011 AFC Champions League and was named the Qatar Stars League Player of the Year in 2013.



Djamel Belmadi's Qatar arrive in Australia as the 2014 Gulf Cup champions after the two-time AFC Asian Cup quarter-finalists secured relatively comfortable qualification for a fourth consecutive tournament from Group D alongside Bahrain having only lost once to their Middle Eastern neighbours.

Qatar made their AFC Asian Cup debut in 1980, but a tough draw saw them grouped with two-time champions Korea Republic and hosts and eventual winners Kuwait, and they fell short of the knockout stage.

Four consecutive group stage exits followed as well as a failed qualifying campaign in 1996, before Qatar finally advanced to the knockout stage for the first time in 2000 in Lebanon.

Having qualified as the second best third place finisher after drawing all three games against Japan, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, Qatar progressed to their first-ever quarter-final appearance only to be eliminated by China.

Group stage exits followed in 2004 and 2007 before, on home soil in 2011, Qatar rose to the

Record: Quarter-Finals 2000, 2011; Group Stage 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2004, 2007

Qualified as: Runner-up Group D

challenge and returned to the quarter-finals, where they gave eventual champions Japan a fright before losing to a 90th minute goal from Masahiko Inoha.

Fahad Thani then took over as coach following a disappointing 2013 Gulf Cup and the Qatari led his nation through AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 qualifiers and also helped the side advance to the final round of qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup with an unbeaten record alongside Iran.

But after failing to make an impact in a group which contained Iran, Korea Republic and Uzbekistan, Thani was replaced by Algerian coach Belmadi in March.

And the former Lekhwiya coach's appointment has been a successful one thus far as he led Qatar to a memorable victory at the 2014 Gulf Cup after defeating hosts Saudi Arabia 2-1 in the final in November to cap an unbeaten campaign.

Coach

Djamel Belmadi

Former Marseille, Southampton and Manchester City midfielder Djamel Belmadi

took on his first coaching role in 2010 with newly-promoted Qatar Stars League club Lekhwiya.

And Belmadi led Lekhwiya to back-to-back domestic titles which were the first in their history following promotion from the second division in 2009.

After leaving Lekhwiya, Belmadi took over Qatar B and led them to a comprehensive victory at the 2013/14 WAFF Championship following an undefeated campaign.

He then took over from Fahad Thani as coach of the senior national team in March and led Qatar to their third Gulf Cup title in Riyadh in November after beating hosts Saudi Arabia in the final.

GROUP C

BAHRAIN



Key Player

Ismail Abdullatif

Ismail Abdullatif hit the headlines at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup after joining Behtash Fariba and Ali Daei as the only three players to score four goals in a single match at the continental competition after netting all the goals in the group stage victory over India in Qatar.

Also on target at the 2007 continental finals, where Bahrain also exited in the

group stage, the 28-year-old striker remains his nation's most dangerous threat on goal.

Abdullatif, who has played in Kuwait, Oman and Qatar during his career, was also famously on target in injury time against Saudi Arabia in 2009 to take Bahrain through to the 2010 FIFA World Cup intercontinental play-off against New Zealand.



Former semi-finalists Bahrain will make their fourth consecutive AFC Asian Cup appearance and fifth overall in Australia having produced an impressive qualifying campaign.

The 2004 semi-finalists secured their qualification with two games to spare following an unbeaten campaign against Qatar, Malaysia and Yemen.

Bahrain made their debut at the 1988 AFC Asian Cup, but despite respectable draws with eventual champions Saudi Arabia and 1984 semi-finalists Kuwait, losses to China and Syria ended hopes of progress to the knockout stage.

That group stage elimination precipitated a period of AFC Asian Cup drought for Bahrain, with a 16-year absence before their much-awaited return to the continental finals in 2004.

A 2-2 draw with host China in their opener, and another point secured against Qatar were followed by a 3-1 win over Indonesia to secure passage to the quarter-finals for the first time.

More was to come as Bahrain edged out Uzbekistan on penalties in the last eight, although a semi-final against much-fancied

Record: Quarter-Finals 2000, 2011; Group Stage 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2004, 2007

Qualified as: Runner-up Group D

Japan proved one step too far as the eventual champions secured a 4-3 win.

But three years later having finished a respectable fourth in 2004, Bahrain were unable to replicate their feat as defeats by Saudi Arabia and co-hosts Indonesia either side of a win over Korea Republic ended their campaign in the group stage.

And at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, Bahrain were handed an almost impossible task in the group stage after being paired with Australia, Korea and India.

After defeats to Australia and Korea, Bahrain were able to finish third after beating India 4-1 with four goals from Ismail Abdullatif.

This year has proved a turbulent time in the Bahrain hotseat as first Anthony Hudson departed in August before his replacement Iraqi coach Adnan Hamad was himself dismissed in the midst of their 2014 Gulf Cup campaign with assistant Marjan Eid taking over.

Coach

Marjan Eid

Bahraini coach Marjan Eid took over the national team hotseat midway

through November's Gulf Cup following the dismissal of former AFC Coach of the Year Adnan Hamad.

Eid, who was initially assistant to Hamad during the tournament in Riyadh, then led his nation to a respectable 0-0 draw with eventual winners Qatar, although Bahrain still finished bottom of the group following a draw with Yemen and defeat by Saudi Arabia.

Now in his second spell as Bahrain coach following a short stint as caretaker in 2010 after replacing Austrian Josef Hickersberger, Eid received the backing of the Bahrain Football Association to lead the team in a full-time role for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

GROUP D

JAPAN



Key Player

Keisuke Honda

AC Milan star midfielder Keisuke Honda is unquestionably one of the stars of the world game with his iconic bleached blonde hair marking him out almost as much his technical wizardry on the ball.

Named MVP of the 2011 AFC Asian Cup tournament, in which his nation lifted their fourth title, Honda has been an ever-present for the Blue Samurai since his debut in 2008.

Boasting deadly accuracy from set-pieces as well as a keen eye for a defence-splitting pass, Honda is as much a skilled provider as he is a deadly marksman with punishing precision.

Enjoying a prolific start to his second season in Serie A, Honda at 28-years-old is entering his prime just in time for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.



Coach

Javier Aguirre

Mexican Javier Aguirre replaced 2011 AFC Asian Cup-winning coach

Alberto Zaccheroni following Japan's group stage exit at the 2014 FIFA World Cup

Aguirre has twice led his home nation to the last 16 of the FIFA World Cup during two spells in charge of Mexico following second round appearances in both 2002 and 2010.

He also led Mexico to the final of the 2001 Copa America and the CONCACAF Gold Cup title in 2009.

The 56-year-old has also spent considerable time in Spain's La Liga with Osasuna, Atletico Madrid, Zaragoza and most recently Espanyol prior to joining Japan following their group stage exit in Brazil.

Despite only making their AFC Asian Cup debut in 1998, defending champions Japan have won three of the last four editions and are again one of the favourites for the continental title in 2015.

Having only made their debut four years earlier, Japan first tasted continental glory as tournament hosts in 1992 after beating Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the final.

And after reaching the quarter-finals in 1996, a second title arrived in 2000 in Lebanon after again edging out Saudi Arabia by a single goal.

Japan, who average two goals per game at the AFC Asian Cup, retained the title four years later after this time beating hosts China 3-1 in the final.

The Samurai Blue also ended the continental campaign of AFC Asian Cup debutants Australia in the quarter-finals in 2007 as Japan prevailed on penalties en route to a fourth place finish.

A record fourth continental title arrived at the expense of Australia in 2011 in Qatar as

Record: Champion 1992, 2000, 2004, 2011;
Fourth Place: 2007; Quarter-Finals: 1996;
Group Stage: 1988

Qualified as: Defending Champions

Tadanari Lee's spectacular extra-time volley secured victory in the final.

Boasting a similar story of success on the world stage, Japan have qualified for five consecutive FIFA World Cups since 1998 and memorably progressed to the Round of 16 in 2002 and 2010 while also claiming second place at the 2001 FIFA Confederations Cup.

However, Japan's group stage exit at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil saw the departure of Alberto Zaccheroni, with former Mexico coach Javier Aguirre appointed in place of the 2011 AFC Asian Cup winner.

Aguirre was able to steady the ship in the build up to Australia, which included 2-1 win over the Socceroos in October.

AC Milan's Keisuke Honda, playmaker Shinji Kagawa of Borussia Dortmund and Bundesliga targetman Shinji Okazaki remain key for Japan as they go in search of a fourth AFC Asian Cup title in January.

GROUP D

JORDAN



Key Player

Ahmad Hayel

Kuwait-based striker Ahmad Hayel was Jordan's top scorer during the AFC Asian Cup qualifiers after netting three goals to help his nation secure a runner-up spot in Group A.

The Al Arabi forward now boasts over 80 international caps for his country having made his international debut for Jordan in 2005.

And Hayel continues to lead the line for Jordan, with the 31-year-old striker playing in the lone frontman role in the build-up to the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Hayel also remains a fixture for Al Arabi with the prolific number nine having averaged close to a goal every two games for the Kuwaiti Premier League side since 2012.



Having progressed to the quarter-finals in their two previous trips to the continental finals, Jordan will be looking to not only repeat that record in reaching the knockout stages for a third time but advance further still and challenge for the title in Australia following recent successes.

Despite not making a first appearance at the AFC Asian Cup until 2004, Jordan had tasted glory in the Pan Arab Games after winning consecutive titles at the 1997 and 1999 editions under legendary coach Mohammad Awad.

A spiritual successor to Awad, the late Mahmoud El Gohary then paved the way for a golden period as the Egyptian coach achieved iconic status by leading Jordan to the quarter-finals of the 2004 AFC Asian Cup.

And having missed the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, Jordan also advanced undefeated to the quarter-finals in 2011 only to fall at the last eight after suffering a 2-1 defeat by Uzbekistan, although more progress on the international stage was just around the corner.

Record: Quarter-Finals 2004, 2011

Qualified as: Runner-up Group A

Under another Egyptian coach, Hossam Hassan, Jordan gained revenge over Uzbekistan in the continental play-off for the 2014 FIFA World Cup after winning 9-8 on penalties following a 2-2 draw on aggregate.

But the intercontinental play-off with South America's fifth-placed team, Uruguay, proved one step too far for Jordan despite having posted home wins over both Japan and Australia en route to a third place finish in the final round of qualifiers for Brazil.

Jordan were able to claim a commendable goalless draw in Montevideo, but were eliminated following a 5-0 defeat at home.

But the 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign highlighted Jordan's significant progress, and a runners-up finish at the WAFF Championship and third-place at the AFC U-22 Championship also came at the start of 2014 to highlight recent growth within the Hashemite Kingdom.

Coach

Ray Wilkins

Ray Wilkins was a key midfielder for England in the 1980s as well as at various

top flight clubs including Chelsea, Manchester United, AC Milan, Queens Park Rangers and Glasgow Rangers.

A player-manager at QPR, Wilkins then went on to full-time coaching roles at Fulham, Chelsea, Watford and Millwall before returning to Chelsea.

The pinnacle of his time at Chelsea was his role as assistant manager under Italian Carlo Ancellotti as the side won the Premier League title and FA Cup in 2010 to secure the first double in the club's history.

And after a brief spell working with Fulham, Wilkins succeeded Egyptian Hossam Hassan as Jordan coach in September.

GROUP D

IRAQ



Key Player

Younus Mahmoud

Both mentor and icon for Iraq, Younus Mahmoud was named MVP and joint top scorer at the 2007 AFC Asian Cup with his historic winner in the final against Saudi Arabia enshrined in Asian football folklore.

And Mahmoud to this day remains the face and talisman of Iraq football and his four crucial goals in qualifying for the AFC

Asian Cup Australia 2015 showed he has lost none of his potency in the penalty area as the 31-year-old much-travelled striker finished joint second on the top scorers list only one behind Ali Mabkhout and Reza Ghoochannejhad.

Mahmood also appeared at the 2004 AFC Asian Cup before helping Iraq finish fourth at the Olympic Games later that year.



Iraq's historic victory at the 2007 AFC Asian Cup shocked Asia and claimed global headlines as the war-torn nation edged out Saudi Arabia 1-0 in Jakarta thanks to Younus Mahmoud's iconic header.

A repeat of that success in Australia, though, would not be as much of a surprise despite Iraq only securing qualification for a sixth consecutive finals on the last day of qualifying with a win over China.

The 2015 edition of the tournament will be Iraq's eighth appearance at the continental finals since they first qualified in 1972.

Four years later, Iraq reached the semi-finals where they ultimately finished in a respectable fourth place.

But it would be another two decades before Iraq returned to the top level of Asian competition at the 1996 edition of the tournament in the UAE where they were eliminated in the last eight.

Iraq then achieved two more quarter-final finishes at the next two AFC Asian Cups.

With the tournament changing its four-year cycle starting from the 2007 AFC Asian Cup onwards, though, Iraq would embark on a fairytale run to claim their historic

Record: Champion 2007; Fourth Place 1976; Quarter-Finals 1996, 2000, 2004, 2011; Group Stage 1972

Qualified as: Group C Runners-up

maiden continental championship following a memorable night in the Indonesian capital that made global headlines.

And while Iraq's defence of the title at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup ended in their fourth quarter-final exit, Iraq could be well on their way to creating another dynasty to shake the continent in Australia.

After winning the AFC U-22 Championship earlier this year with a flawless record, Iraq added the AFC U-14 Championship in August and the bronze medal at the 2014 Asian Games.

And despite a disappointing group stage exit at the 2014 Gulf Cup, the likes of 2013 AFC Youth Player of the Year Ali Adnan, AFC U-22 Championship MVP Amjed Kalaf and prodigiously talented 18-year-old Humam Tariq promise a bright future, with evergreen striker and captain Mahmood continuing to lead the line.

Coach

Radhi Shenaishil

Former Iraq defender Radhi Shenaishil succeeded Hakeem Shakir

as coach in December following Iraq's group stage exit at the Gulf Cup.

The 48-year-old currently manages Qatar SC in the Qatar Stars League, but agreed to take on the dual-role after Iraq lost to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates at the Gulf Cup..

Shenaishil previously enjoyed a short spell in charge of Iraq in 2009, while the former defender worked with the U-23 side between 2011-2012. Shenaishil, who has also managed several clubs in the Iraqi Premier League, won over 80 international caps as a player and helped Iraq reach the quarter-finals of the AFC Asian Cup in 1996.

GROUP D

PALESTINE



Key Player

Ashraf Nu'man

Ashraf Nu'man scored four goals in five games, including the solitary goal in the final against the Philippines, as Palestine won the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 following an unbeaten campaign in the Maldives.

Normally a midfielder, the 28-year-old was used as a striker at the AFC Challenge Cup

as Palestine were without six recognised strikers, but Nu'man ensured their absences were not felt in the Maldives.

And following his success at the AFC Challenge Cup having helped unfancied Taraji Wadi Al Nes win the 2013/14 West Bank Premier League, Nu'man joined Saudi Arabian side Al Faisaly ahead of the 2014/15 season.



Palestine will be the only debutants at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 following their victory at the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup.

A second-half free-kick from tournament leading scorer Ashraf Nu'man proved the difference against the Philippines in the final at the National Stadium in Male at the end of May as Palestine's 1-0 win completed an unbeaten campaign without conceding a goal.

With the fifth and final edition of the AFC Challenge Cup also offering the winner the 16th and final berth at the AFC Asian Cup, Palestine built on a semi-final appearance at the previous tournament.

Palestine beat Kyrgyzstan and Myanmar before drawing with the Maldives in the group stage before Nu'man scored twice to edge out Afghanistan in the semi-final.

And it was Palestine who were left celebrating after 12 days in the Maldives as Nu'man's 59th minute free-kick denied the Philippines as Jamal Mahmoud's side gained revenge for losing to the Azkals in the third place play-off two years earlier in Nepal.

Qualified as: 2014 AFC Challenge Cup Winners

Former Jordan international Mahmoud had been appointed coach ahead of the 2011 Pan Arab Games and masterminded a run to the semi-finals after Palestine had finished third at the 1999 edition.

Palestine's progress continued at the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup as DPR Korea claimed a hard-fought 2-0 win in their semi-final.

Palestine, though, then claimed their first-ever win at the 2012 WAFF Championship after beating Lebanon 1-0 in Kuwait City. Although Palestine did only manage a solitary draw at the 2013/14 WAFF Championship, that was soon forgotten as they secured victory at the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup.

AFC Challenge Cup-winning coach Mahmoud, though, resigned for personal reasons following September's Peace Cup in the Philippines to be replaced by former assistant Ahmed Al Hassan for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Coach

Ahmed Al Hassan

Former national team goalkeeper Ahmed Al Hassan was

appointed Palestine coach in October after AFC Challenge Cup-winning coach Jamal Mahmoud resigned following September's Peace Cup in the Philippines.

As a player, Al Hassan played for Palestine's Al Amari Club and Hilal Areeha, while the goalkeeper also played in Iraq with Haifa Sports Club before retiring in 1990.

He started his coaching career in 1992 with Haifa Sports Club's youth teams before ending his association with the Baghdad-based club in 1995. Al Hassan won the prestigious Norway Cup with Palestine in 2006 before switching to the Palestine women's team in 2012.

HOMETOWN HERO

THERE ARE FEW BIGGER STARS IN ASIAN FOOTBALL THAN TIM CAHILL, AND THE AUSTRALIAN STRIKER HAS HIS SIGHTS SET ON DELIVERING A FIRST-EVER AFC ASIAN CUP TITLE FOR THE SOCCEROOS WHEN THEY HOST THE TOURNAMENT IN JANUARY.

By: Michael Church Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images



Eight times over the last nine years, Japanese defenders have been tasked with keeping Tim Cahill quiet; more often than not, the backline of the Samurai Blue has failed to silence the most prolific goal scorer in the history of Australian football.

Since the Socceroos became a fixture on the Asian football scene at the start

of 2006, Cahill has become a thorn in the side of successive teams as the rivalry between Australia and Japan has developed into one of the most significant in the continental scene.

Five times Cahill has found the back of the net against Japan; from his first at the finals of the FIFA World Cup in the German city of Kaiserslautern through to the nations' most recent friendly meeting in Osaka in November, the New York Red Bull





forward has held a hex over the four-time Asian champions.

The most recent goal – a trademark header from the former Evertonian late in proceedings – was more than a consolation in a game the Japanese won 2-1; it was a warning that, while Cahill may have turned 35 in December, he remains a significant threat when the AFC Asian Cup kicks off in January.

“It could be the same as when I played against Sunderland, or when I played against Liverpool or when I played against Man City. I play the game, not the occasion,” says Cahill of his goal scoring record.

“But I think the nice thing about playing in Japan is the fans. It’s such a beautiful place to play: the fans, the stadium, the rivalry, the respect for each other and at the same time we are the powerhouses of Asia and if you look at the last Asian Cup when we lost in the final to them and the past games that we’ve played, it’s always been a really difficult scenario to play in.

“The one thing I would say is, I enjoy football and as every game goes and you watch me playing for Australia, I’m playing it like it’s going to be my last because you don’t know long you can play for or how long you want to play for the national team.

“For myself, it felt so great scoring that goal because, even though the game was a friendly, the stage was set and it was fantastic

in Osaka. I know we were down 2-0, but they’ll know when they play me next time in Australia that they’ve got to be wary. They were talking before the game about how they were going to stop me and that I

“THE ONE THING I WOULD SAY IS, I ENJOY FOOTBALL AND AS EVERY GAME GOES AND YOU WATCH ME PLAYING FOR AUSTRALIA, I’M PLAYING IT LIKE IT’S GOING TO BE MY LAST BECAUSE YOU DON’T KNOW LONG YOU CAN PLAY FOR OR HOW LONG YOU WANT TO PLAY FOR THE NATIONAL TEAM.”

wasn’t playing, and it’s good for me to keep reminding them that I’m always working.”

It is a warning worth bearing in mind as both nations line up at the finals of the AFC Asian Cup during the Australian summer, with Cahill and his team mates focused on ending what is turning into a hoodoo the Japanese have held over the Socceroos at the continental championship.

The event on home soil will be Australia’s third appearance at the AFC Asian Cup and on their two previous involvements in

the competition – in 2007 and 2011 – they have been eliminated by Japan: in a penalty shootout in the quarter-finals in 2007 and, agonisingly for the Socceroos, in the final four years later, when a goal in extra-time from Tadanari Lee kept the trophy in Japan.

The loss in Doha was particularly keenly felt by an Australian side that had impressed throughout the tournament in Qatar, with the Holger Osieck-coached team dominant for much of the final before Lee’s wonder strike won the game.

“I feel the quarter-finals was probably justified when we played in Thailand and Vietnam,” says Cahill. “It was certainly a new learning experience for us, something that was new and we were still in transition from joining the AFC.

“But if you look at the last one in Qatar, it was bitterly disappointing because it could have gone either way. The goal they scored was a great strike but we seriously thought we were the better team overall, but they nicked it. We had a lot of injuries and we just couldn’t get over the final hurdle.

“But this Asian Cup is a massive opportunity for us, regardless of new players and the transition that’s going on. Again, they’re young players but we’re at home and it’s exciting times. We have a realistic chance of winning the Asian Cup in front of our own fans and lifting a trophy that would



mean so much to the country.”

As he showed at the FIFA World Cup finals in Brazil, Cahill remains an important factor in Australia’s pursuit of success. Goals against Chile and the Netherlands – an unforgettable strike that was nominated for FIFA’s Puskas Award – earned the ex-Millwall man plaudits globally, but in the end Ange Postecoglou’s young and inexperienced side slipped out at the end of the group stages.

Since then, the Australians have continued to build towards the AFC Asian Cup finals and, although results in subsequent friendly matches have not gone their way, Cahill is confident the experience earned by the squad will be beneficial when the tournament kicks off on January 9.

“We would have love to have won the games, but the reason behind it was to put us in uncomfortable environments,” says Cahill of the run of recent friendlies.

“We could have played Qatar and UAE in Australia and won both games comfortably. But what’s that really going to do for the team and the players, other than give you false hope and not prepare you properly for the hardest test in football?”

“So, if you go to Japan in front of 50,000 people as your last game before the Asian Cup, it tests you mentally and physically. If you go to Qatar and play in the heat and the situations that you’re not really used to when

*Left Playing for
New York Red Bulls*

*Top Left, Bottom Left & Above
Playing for Australia during FIFA
World Cup 2014 Qualifiers*

**“WE HAVE A REALISTIC
CHANCE OF WINNING
THE ASIAN CUP IN FRONT
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WOULD MEAN SO MUCH TO
THE COUNTRY.”**

you don’t really have to, the best thing is that he’s playing boys who have never been in that environment and he’ll know who can hack it and who can’t.

“The only way is to test them. Overall it’s all going to come down to the results in the Asian Cup and we’ll see what will happen in the end. But we’re going to give it our all and the main thing is that I believe in the players and I believe in the team. It’s actually the responsibility of the players now, to step up and see if they can deliver when it counts.”

A key element in Australia’s regeneration and improvement, believes Cahill, was the appointment of Postecoglou as head coach to replace Osieck in late 2013 following demoralising, heavy defeats against Brazil and France.

Possessing significant experience of

the set-up within the Football Federation Australia and vast knowledge of the domestic A-League, the former Brisbane Roar coach has overseen a rebuilding of the team that has given the squad renewed confidence.

And with Australia’s ‘Golden Generation’ of players now largely retired, a new approach was required for the Socceroos, not just with the AFC Asian Cup in mind, but for success in the future as well.

“He’s created an amazing mindset and the professionalism has gone to a different level within the national team,” says Cahill of Postecoglou. “He given us every chance to be the best we can be.

“Now it’s about responsibility with the players, they need to carry over the message of what we’ve been taught tactically, to deliver in Australia. I’m really positively happy with the way things have been going and progressing.

“I think under Holger and Guus Hiddink you could press an auto select button and have some of the players playing in the biggest leagues in Europe, which was a plus straight off from the start when you’re a manager.

“With Ange, he’s had to dig into the A-League, into players that are not playing and players who need games and the players who need confidence and he’s



put them in an environment where they're uncomfortable and tested them to see whether he would take them for the final hurdle at the Asian Cup.

"My main thing is his belief. The way he coaches and the way he tries to get the maximum from every player and really emphasizing what it means to play for your country. For me, it's unbelievable because he's Australian and he gets it.

"It's not like when you bring in an international manager, who comes in, takes his big pay cheque, ticks the boxes off of what the criteria are that he needs to meet and then he goes off. It was nice having the barbecues and learning how to be Australian, but it's just not the same when you have a manager like Ange who takes it personally.

"You know when you leave camp – especially after some of the camps we've had – you know sometimes that you need to do better, what do I work on. It's one of the best things for Australian football, because someone's actually there who's not only going to help the first team, he's also going to bring the 17s, the 19s and he's going to make sure he knows what's coming through with the development of the A-League, which for me is what's most important.

"In the past we had so many good players playing overseas that even some of them couldn't get into the team. It wasn't that the

A-League or Australian football was getting overlooked, the standard of the players was so high and there were so many players overseas that it was fantastic for us as a national team because you saw the benefits

"I'M VERY FIT, VERY PROFESSIONAL AND I KNOW I'LL PLAY FOR ANOTHER THREE YEARS MINIMUM DOMESTICALLY, AND INTERNATIONALLY IT REALLY DEPENDS ON WHAT I WANT TO DO PERSONALLY AS AN ATHLETE AND AS A FAMILY MAN."

of what we had created and the noises that we were making at international level."

Despite the loss of the majority of Australia's high profile, internationally recognised players, Cahill is confident the Socceroos can build for the future and follow the example of nations with similar-sized populations to become a power of the global game.

"We're not going to be a defensive side, we're going to go out and win the game and what I like about Ange is he wants to affect the game and he wants people to respect our football," he says.

"He said to us, do we want to be a team that goes to the World Cup and not get a point and not have a shot but it's best going out there showing intent and being brave with your football because then the world will respect you more and you'll respect yourself and you'll have that belief. If you do it more times than others then you'll come through the other side.

"And maybe we can be the next Chile or the next Holland or something like that. But it's going to take time, and it takes belief and working at it."

Australia have been drawn at the AFC Asian Cup to face fellow FIFA World Cup qualifiers Korea Republic as well as Kuwait and an Oman side that caused them significant problems along the road to Brazil 2014.

And while Cahill admits he and his team mates will be running the rule over their opponents ahead of each game, he believes their focus should principally be on themselves.

"I know how good all these teams are," he says. "We'll do a little bit of research on them and I'll do a bit on my own with our analyst guys, but we should really just concentrate on ourselves and how we are going to attack the game. That's how this Asian Cup should be for now because it's going to be an uncomfortable environment for these teams



Above Tim Cahill in action for Australia during qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

coming to Australia to play in this competition.

“We know Kuwait are a great team, technically. We know the stats of how long the ball’s in play when we play these kinds of teams and what their weaknesses and strengths are. It’s the same for Oman, the same for Korea. They’re very technical, gifted players.

“If you give them a sniff they grow in confidence. If you get the early goal, especially at home, it’s definitely going to uncomfortable for these teams playing against us in front of full stadiums in a big competition. It’s going to be a tough task whoever we play and we respect them all.”

Cahill remains, alongside Mark Bresciano, the last of Australia’s golden generation still playing for the national team, but he refuses to rule out continuing to play for the Socceroos after the completion of the AFC Asian Cup.

With one year left on his contract in Major League Soccer, he remains keen to play on for several years – at club level at least – and has not ruled out another move before hanging up his boots.

“I’ve not really thought about it,” he says regarding possible retirement. “People asked me the same question before the World Cup, whether I’d make it to the World Cup. Then, after the World Cup they were asking me if I’d make

it to the Japan game. And after the Japan game, they’re asking me if I’ll make it to the Asian Cup. You take it as you go.

“I’m very fit, very professional and I know I’ll play for another three years minimum domestically, and internationally it really depends on what I want to do personally as an athlete and as a family man. That’s something I’ll definitely assess after the Asian Cup, but it won’t be if we play through the tournament and reach the final that I’ll be tired and I’ll stop.

“It will be a decision that I make not because I’ve had a great Asian Cup or a bad Asian Cup, because nothing really changes over one month of football. People will say it’s been a long tournament or whatever. Either way I’ll decide because there’s a tough World Cup qualifying campaign that’s going to take place and whether the calendar fits in with the domestic football, or wherever I chose to play next or if I stay in New York.

“I’d be happy to consider anywhere, in Asia or the Middle East. I’ve always flirted with the idea. I’ve had some great discussions in the past. For me, it’s all about leaving a legacy now and making sure I can impact the league I’m playing in, like I have done in America, like I did in the Premier League, like I’ve done globally. It’s all about whether it suits on a legacy level for football and how I can help first on football pitch and then into grassroots and helping people get behind football.”

You can follow Tim Cahill on Twitter @Tim_Cahill



Tim Cahill

Nationality:

Australia

DOB:

6/12/1979

Position:

Forward

Current club:

New York Red Bulls
(USA)

Previous clubs:

Millwall
Everton
(both England)



CHAMPIONSHIP AMBITIONS

A MEMBER OF THE KOREA REPUBLIC SIDE THAT CLAIMED THIRD PLACE AT THE 2011 AFC ASIAN CUP, FORMER AFC YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR KI SUNG-YUENG IS FOCUSING ON ONE GOAL: ENDING HIS NATION'S 55-YEAR CONTINENTAL TITLE DROUGHT.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images

This January, Ki Sung-yueng's life will come full circle with a return to Australia. And this time it is the hopes of not just one young boy but of an entire nation of 51 million he bears as Korea Republic look to claim their first AFC Asian Cup title in 55 years when the tournament kicks-off in January.

Gwangju-born Ki spent his early teenage years at John Paul College in Daisy Hill, south of Brisbane, where he was known as David amongst

his classmates between 2001-2004, dreaming of scoring at Manchester United's Old Trafford.

Fast-forward a decade to the beginning of the 2014/15 English Premier League season and legendary Dutch coach Louis van Gaal's first game in charge of United at Old Trafford on August 16.

Their opponents, Swansea City, featured a central midfielder wearing the number four, thousands of miles displaced from South East Queensland, now 25-years-old and in his third season in one of the toughest leagues in the







world.

And his moment comes two minutes shy of the 30 minute mark as team-mate Nathan Dyer cuts in from the right flank and rolls a pass across the edge of the penalty area for the unmarked midfielder to slot past United goalkeeper David de Gea and into the bottom corner, leaving the home crowd stunned into silence.

He no longer goes by his English name David but the one given to him by his family, the name that reverberates around the cavernous Old Trafford stands over the speakers, Ki Sung-yueng. And he boasts a pedigree to envy: 2009 AFC Young Player of the Year, 2012 Olympic bronze medalist, 2013 English League Cup winner, 2010/11 Scottish Premier League winner, two-time Korean Football Association Footballer of the Year and an ever-present in the Korea national team with whom he is appeared at the FIFA World Cups twice and one AFC Asian Cup.

Ki's strike against United, the first goal of the 2014/15 season that contributed to Swansea's 2-1 win, was more than just an impressive addition to his list of achievements; it was a goal that transported the former FC Seoul, Celtic, and Sunderland midfielder back to his

childhood.

"It was like a dream that I had when I was young, it was truly a dream come true to score against Manchester United," says Ki. "I think it's something very special because it's not easy to score in at Old Trafford and against Manchester United."

"It was my first goal for Swansea and it helped us to win the game and I think no one expected us to win at Manchester United."

For Ki's national team, though, expectations for one of the powerhouse sides in Asia could not be more different. A disappointing 2014 FIFA World Cup group stage exit saw the departure of coach Hong Myung-bo, a national hero, and drew even greater focus on their continental title drought of 55 years, a slump that has persisted for far too long for Korea's passionate fans and players.

Korea have not won the AFC Asian Cup since claiming back-to-back titles in the first two tournaments in 1956 and 1960 despite impressing in Qatar in 2011 as they finished third.

"The first thing is we want to win the Asian Cup, and the second thing is we want to show that we are one of the best teams in Asia," says Ki.

"Recently we didn't show the fans that we are a really good team and we are strong enough to be champion. So maybe some people are very disappointed with Korean football."

"But I feel we have great potential. We have a lot of young players and then some very experienced players. I think this time that we can show to the people that we can perform well in Australia and be champion."

Although one of the pre-tournament favourites, Korea will face a stern test of their measure in the very first round of the 2015 edition.

Ki and his team-mates will kick off their campaign against Oman in Canberra on January 10 where they will remain for the tie with 1980 winners Kuwait on January 13 before travelling to Ki's former hometown of Brisbane for their hotly-anticipated tie with hosts Australia on January 17.

And should they progress to the next phase, Uli Stielike's side will face off against either the winners or runners-up of Group B in Melbourne or Brisbane on January 22.

"I think it's not easy, it's going to be very tough because we will play against Australia, which is going to be very, very hard game for us and also Kuwait. Oman, they are not easy team," says Ki.



Top Left Korea finished third at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar.

Bottom Left & Left Ki helped Korea qualify for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

Above Ki scored as Swansea beat Manchester United at Old Trafford in August.

"So every single game is going to be very competitive, and if we don't focus or if we don't play 100%, I think we can't get the result that we want to achieve.

"So, I think the first game is going to be very important for us. If we win the first game I think we can qualify. So we need to focus on the first game."

Ki was instrumental in Korea's run to the semi-finals of the 2011 edition of the continental championship when, despite impressing throughout the tournament, Cho Kwang-rae's side slipped out of contention after losing to Japan on penalties in the semi-finals.

It was a disappointing end for a team that had dazzled at times in Qatar, with Koo Ja-cheol finishing the tournament as top scorer in a team inspired by retiring veteran Park Ji-sung and also featuring the goal scoring talents of Ji Dong-won.

Korea did defeat Uzbekistan in the third place play-off to secure an automatic qualification berth for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

"I think the competition in Qatar was very,

very good," says Ki. "We played well, but we didn't become champion.

"Unfortunately, what was most memorable for me was the match against Japan. In the penalties, we missed three out of three, so it was very disappointing. I think we felt sorry for ourselves and then also for the fans in Korea.

"Even though we played good football we didn't get the result, so this time I think I don't care if we play attractive football or play well, but I think this time we want to get some results and we want to be champion. So it doesn't matter how we play, we should win the Asian Cup."

While a proud and patriotic Korean, it's undeniable that the location of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup is extra special for Ki, and for the midfielder playing in Australia will represent a homecoming of sorts.

"This is like my second country," says Ki. "I was there for four years when I was growing up, so I feel like my hometown is in Australia. It's also going to be great to see some of my friends in Australia. I think they are expecting a lot of things from me. So it's going to be great chance to see them and great chance to go back to Australia."



Ki Sung-yueng

Nationality: Korea Republic

DOB: 24/01/1989

Position: Midfielder

Current club:
Swansea City (Wales)

Previous clubs:
FC Seoul (Korea Republic)
Celtic (Scotland)
Sunderland (England)



NO LIMITS

NASSIR AL SHAMRANI WAS NAMED 2014 AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR HAVING FIRED AL HILAL TO THE FINAL OF THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE.

AND HAVING BEEN THE LEADING ASIAN SCORER IN THE CONTINENTAL TOURNAMENT, AS WELL AS TOP MARKSMAN IN THE SAUDI ARABIAN TOP FLIGHT FOR THE FIFTH TIME IN SEVEN YEARS, AL SHAMRANI'S EYE FOR GOAL IS NOW FIXED ON THE AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015.





When Nassir Al Shamrani scores, it is said that he sends tremors through the packed stands of Riyadh's 67,000-seater King Fahd Stadium,

giving the Al Hilal and Saudi Arabia striker his imposing nickname "The Earthquake."

The Mecca-born striker's physical stature may not reflect such a bombastic moniker – although stocky, Al Shamrani is not a traditionally-built target man at 5'8" – but there is no question that the 31-year-old's feats on the field in 2014 have been sending the Al Hilal faithful bouncing off the Richter scale.

Finishing as the Saudi Pro League top scorer for the 2013/14 season with 21 goals, the fifth time in seven years that he has done so, Al Shamrani was also the highest scoring Asian player in the 2014 AFC Champions League after netting 10 times to lead two-time Asian champions Al Hilal to a runner-up finish in the continental competition.

Equally prolific for his country, Al Shamrani helped Saudi Arabia cruise through the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 qualifiers, with the forward joint-top scorer for the Green Falcons as they topped Group C with an unbeaten record ahead of Iraq, China, and Indonesia.

The 2014 Gulf Cup campaign in November also saw Al Shamrani on target twice as Saudi Arabia finished as runners-up to Qatar in the biennial tournament for Arab nations.

And despite missing out on the top continental and regional prizes with Al Hilal and Saudi Arabia respectively, Al Shamrani reigned supreme at the AFC Annual Awards at the end of November in Manila, where his sensational form in front of goal was rewarded with the prestigious AFC Player of the Year Award ahead of the United Arab Emirates and Al Ain defender Ismail Ahmed and 2006 winner Khalfan Ibrahim of Qatar and Al Sadd.

"I am extremely proud of being named AFC Player of the Year; it's really a dream for any player to receive this accolade. I cannot really describe in words how happy and proud I am to receive this great prize," says Al Shamrani.

"From a personal point of view, it was a magnificent, excellent season. I felt good going into this year and performed really well. At the beginning of every season, I check whatever aspect I need to work on or am missing from my game and then focus on that and work hard to get even better."

Al Shamrani began his footballing career in the youth academy ranks at hometown club Al Wehda before making his professional debut as a 20-year-old in the 2003/04 season.

Two years later, he had attracted the

attention of Riyadh side Al Shabab whom he joined on loan in the middle of the 2005/06 season.

And with Al Shabab, Al Shamrani had his first taste of AFC Champions League action, scoring four times as the team reached the quarter-finals of the 2006 tournament.

Impressed, the capital city club attempted to secure the permanent signing of the young forward but they were rebuffed by Al Wehda to whom he returned following the expiration of the loan deal.

A productive season followed in Mecca before financial problems for Al Wehda saw Al Shabab swoop in the close season with an offer of around USD 3.5 million that Al Shamrani's employers this time could not refuse.

Six goal-laden seasons followed for Al Shamrani as the striker netted over 120 times for Al Shabab, topping the Saudi Pro League scorers chart on four occasions and helping his side claim the domestic championship in 2011/12.

In June 2013, though, after Al Shabab failed to defend their league title and had crashed out of the AFC Champions League in the Round of 16, Al Shamrani moved to his current club and continental powerhouse Al Hilal.

Also based in Riyadh, Al Hilal had lifted the



Asian Club Championship in 1991 and 2000 and their expectant and vociferous fan base hungered for a third continental title.

And in the domestic league, Al Shamrani showed that swapping the white shirts of Al Shabab for the famous blue of Al Hilal had done nothing to blunt his edge in front of goal as he proceeded to average just over a goal a game in the 2013/14 season with his league-leading tally of 21 goals helping his side to a runner-up finish.

But although Al Hilal and Al Shamrani were firing on all cylinders in the league, the club began their 2014 AFC Champions League campaign slowly and needed Al Shamrani's brace to secure a point against UAE side Al Ahli at home having slipped two goals behind.

An away defeat to Sepahan of Iran and another draw, this time to Qatar's Al Sadd, left Al Hilal adrift at the bottom of the group, four points off the leaders at the halfway stage and in danger of a premature exit.

"We really did not perform well at the beginning of the AFC Champions League," says Al Shamrani.

"When you looked at where we were at the halfway point, you would never think that Al Hilal even had a chance to qualify from the group, let alone top it which had been our aim.

"We were having some problems and even

*Far Left, Top Left
& Above During the 2014
AFC Champions League*

*Bottom Left Al Shamrani
joined Al Shabab on a
permanent basis in 2007*

people close to the club were very pessimistic about our chances for qualifying for the knockout stages."

The catalyst for change, though, came in the very next match with the visit of an undefeated Al Sadd side whose last foray in the continental championship had resulted in them lifting the title in 2011.

A Yasser Al Qahtani penalty after just three minutes rocked the away side and Al Hilal's lead was doubled just before the half-hour mark through Sultan Al Duayyi.

And with the Qatari club in disarray, Al Shamrani took full advantage and netted a hat-trick in under 30 minutes either side of half-time as Al Hilal enjoyed a crushing 5-0 victory.

"Winning this match in Riyadh gave us huge confidence and we began to believe we could go further in the competition," says Al Shamrani.

"After this match everyone changed their mind – all the doubters, too – it was a 180 degree change in performance compared to how we'd played in the earlier stages. We started to think that not only could we get to the knockout stage, but also make the final."

Al Shamrani missed the following goalless draw at Al Ahli, but the striker returned to score the game's only goal in their crucial 1-0 win over Sepahan on the final Matchday in front of just under 50,000 at King Fahd Stadium as Al Hilal topped the group.

Round of 16 opponents Bunyodkor of Uzbekistan were defeated 4-0 on aggregate before Al Hilal narrowly negotiated their way through a return meeting with Al Sadd as a 1-0 win in the home leg proved the difference.

At the Al Hilal helm now was a new face in former Steaua Bucharest coach Laurentiu Reghecampf, who had succeeded Saudi Arabia and club legend Sami Al Jaber following May's success over Bunyodkor.

"I felt that I gained a lot of advantages and benefits from both coaches during the AFC Champions League campaign. Although each coach has their own philosophy, personal style and way of thinking, what struck me most is that both made an effort to be close to the players," says Al Shamrani.

"Sami is a Saudi and knows the Arabic way and our culture of course, but coach Reghecampf, despite being from Romania, also made an effort to be close to us, understand our way of thinking and mentality.

"This psychological aspect of coaching that both men showed us is, in my opinion, just as important for the players as any new benefits



from tactics.”

Reghecampf’s next challenge was a semi-final meeting with UAE club Al Ain that saw Al Shamrani in a mouth-watering face-off with Ghana’s star forward Asamoah Gyan.

But it was the Saudi striker who emphatically came out on top, scoring three times over the two legs as Al Hilal secured a place in the final after prevailing 4-2 on aggregate.

The final, though, would prove one step too far for Al Shamrani and Al Hilal as a Tomi Juric goal in Parramatta proved enough over the two legged-tie to secure a narrow 1-0 victory for Australia’s Western Sydney Wanderers.

“We did everything we could in the final, but at the end of the game you have a winner and a loser and we had no luck in the final. It’s not the end of the world, it’s just football,” says Al Shamrani.

“It was a beautiful season for Al Hilal but it was ultimately a disappointing one too as we lost the AFC Champions League final. But we’re a good team and we’ll be back in the AFC Champions League next season and even better.”

But before a chance at redemption for Al Hilal in the continent’s premier club

competition comes, the newly-crowned AFC Player of the Year is set to lead the line for Saudi Arabia in Australia for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup. The three-time champions, who have also reached the final on a further three occasions in eight appearances, will look to claim their first title since 1996 after crashing out in the group stage four years ago in Qatar; only the second time they had suffered a premature elimination from the finals since their debut in 1984.

Saudi Arabia, though, must first negotiate a tricky Group B that includes two-time finalists China, 2011 semi-finalists Uzbekistan and the potentially dangerous DPR Korea.

China, Saudi Arabia’s opponents in their tournament opener on 10 January in Brisbane, are a familiar and relatively recent foe, with the East Asians having edged into the AFC Asian Cup finals as the best third place finisher from the same qualifying group as Al Shamrani and his team-mates.

A close 2-1 victory in their opening qualifier back in February 2013, thanks to goals from Naif Hazazi and Fahad Al Muwallad in either half, began Saudi Arabia’s four-game winning streak that clinched them qualification with two games remaining, although the return meeting in Xian nine months later saw the sides share

a goalless draw, which proved a vital point for China in their penultimate group Matchday.

“China are a stubborn team in the field and are not easy. They have quite a few players from Guangzhou Evergrande who won the 2013 AFC Champions League so they obviously have skill. Even though we beat them in qualifying, we drew the second game, so it will be difficult,” says Al Shamrani.

“Uzbekistan are also very tough with strong players, they are probably our biggest challenge in the group, and we’ll have to be at our best against them. But we know them and China well, and so we know what to expect from these teams.

“With DPR Korea, even though some may consider them weaker than others, these kinds of teams raise their games a lot when they reach the finals of tournaments, so we won’t be underestimating them at all – and they’ve developed a lot in recent times.

“For me though, the key to opening the doors to the knockout stages will be the first match against China; if we win that I am confident we can get through to the quarter-finals.

“From there, we’ll go step-by-step and observe how the other teams do, but I’m confident that we will do our best to reach the



Top Left At the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar.

Above & Left Al Shamrani scored twice as Saudi Arabia reached the final of the Gulf Cup in November.

final and reclaim our crown.

"At the Gulf Cup in November, even though we reached the final, our performance was not up to the expected standard by the players or by the fans so we will surely have to raise our game at the Asian Cup.

"We want to do really well in Australia and make our country proud of us."

At the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, Al Shamrani was forced to take a back seat as Malek Mouath and Al Qahtani were the preferred forwards in a side that reached the final of the competition, only to be undone by Iraq's fairytale campaign in the championship climax in Jakarta. And four years later, with AFC Asian Cup hosting rights won by neighbours Qatar, it was Al Ittihad's young striker Hazazi who was given the nod to partner Al Shamrani's Al Hilal team-mate Al Qahtani up front.

But in Australia, barely a month after claiming the continent's top individual accolade, it will be in Al Shamrani's direction that the Green Falcons look to spearhead their attack. And with the pressure is on Saudi

Arabia to bounce back from the disappointing showing at the 2011 edition where the side crashed out in the group stages without picking up a point and scoring just once.

"When you are awarded any kind of prize, it is motivation for a player to challenge himself more and show more for both his club and the national team. I am not playing for myself but for them. In Australia I will be doing my all for Saudi Arabia," says Al Shamrani.

"Being named a top scorer in the Saudi Pro League, an AFC Champions League top scorer ahead of many famous names, being named AFC Player of the Year, these are all things that make me look forward to the Asian Cup and challenge me to obtain my goal of becoming the top goal scorer in Australia.

"That's the level of which I am hoping to reach.

"As a player, I want to aim for the very highest I can. I feel there are no limits to what I can accomplish.

"While this year was particularly special, I can't say this was me at my peak because I am very ambitious.

"I will never rest on one level, but keep reaching for the next step in my progression as a player."



Nassir Al Shamrani

Nationality:
Saudi Arabia

DOB: 23/11/1983

Position: Striker

Current club:
Al Hilal (Saudi Arabia)

Previous clubs:
Al Wehda
Al Shabab (Both Saudi Arabia)

BUILT FOR SUCCESS

TWO-TIME AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND CURRENT UZBEKISTAN CAPTAIN SERVER DJEPAROV HAS PLAYED AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP ON THREE PREVIOUS OCCASIONS, BUT FOLLOWING A MAIDEN SEMI-FINAL APPEARANCE FOR THE CENTRAL ASIANS IN 2011, HOPES ARE HIGH FOR MORE SUCCESS IN AUSTRALIA IN JANUARY.

By: Andrew Mullen • Photo: World Sport Group

Throughout his career, Uzbekistan captain and two-time AFC Player of the Year Server Djeparov has only known success.

In 11 years between 2002 and 2012, the current Seongnam midfielder won 10 domestic titles and was crowned Asia's best player on two occasions in 2008 and 2011.

The most recent individual continental accolade came at the end of a year that had started with Uzbekistan reaching the semi-finals of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time.

Captain Djeparov scored twice and missed only a handful of minutes as Uzbekistan eventually finished fourth in Qatar, with the Central Asians producing a spirited fight back in the third place play-off against Korea Republic having lost a forgettable semi-final 6-0 to eventual runners-up Australia.

That success, despite ultimately losing 3-2 to Korea having conceded three goals inside the first 40 minutes in Doha, finally saw Uzbekistan establish themselves as a genuine contender for the Asian title having reached the previous two quarter-finals.

"I want to help to my team-mates with my experience and other players who played in the last Asian Cup try to do it as well," says Djeparov, who also appeared for Uzbekistan at the AFC Asian Cup in 2004 and 2007.

"I hope we can give useful aspects to the team and it will be historic year for us.

"All the matches which we won are good memories for me because it is the most prestigious competition for national teams in Asia and victories give you pride."

And having also again reached the play-offs for the 2014 FIFA World Cup Uzbekistan, who fell in the group stage in their first two AFC Asian Cup appearances in 2004 and 2007 having gained independence from the USSR, secured a fifth consecutive appearance at the continental finals in Australia after finishing second in their

qualification group behind an impressive United Arab Emirates.

"We always have confidence. It is not the first big tournament for our national team and we tried to show our game in the matches before the tournament," says 32-year-old Djeparov, who has amassed over 100 caps for Uzbekistan.

"We qualified for the semi-final in the last Asian Cup, so we will try to achieve that previous result in Australia. It's our minimum target, and our maximum goal is to be champions.

"I think Australia, Japan Korea Republic and Uzbekistan will be tournament favourites in the 2015 Asian Cup."

Uzbekistan had made a slow start to their qualifying campaign after being held at home to Hong Kong before losing in the UAE.

But back-to-back wins over Vietnam and a further success over Hong Kong secured a relatively comfortable qualification before ending the campaign with a 1-1 draw at home to the UAE at home.

"We played well even in the first games, but we were unlucky in those matches. We couldn't take our chances," says Djeparov, who featured in all six games during the Group E campaign.

"Then we changed everything and showed our potential. Any team is not easy to play and you have to play good football if you want to win matches in Asia."

And Uzbekistan will face DPR Korea, China and Saudi Arabia in the group stage in Australia.

"First matches are always important for each team. We have played some games against DPR Korea before and we will learn from them and try to show our best in the first match of Asian Cup," says Djeparov.

"We have also played a lot of matches against China. They are improving in recent years and we drew with them at the

last Asian Cup.

"And Saudi Arabia is a strong team. I think there are no easy games for any team. They try to play attacking football like our team and I expect an interesting game with Saudi Arabia."

Uzbekistan's chances of success in Australia have been boosted as legendary former midfielder Mirdjalal Kasimov stepped down from his dual-role as Bunyodkor coach to fully concentrate on the national team.

"It has helped him to have more concentration on the national team after he began to work full-time with the national team and this factor will help the team," says Djeparov of former team-mate Kasimov.

"He is busy with national team duties and can give more attention to each player."

Having won the Uzbekistan domestic crown in nine consecutive seasons with Pakhtakor and Bunyodkor, Djeparov will head to Australia having completed a domestic season in Korea with Seongnam FC having previously won the K-League title with FC Seoul in 2010 while initially on loan.

And having also won the Saudi Arabian title with Al Shabab in 2012, Djeparov helped Seongnam win the 2014 Korean FA Cup having scored seven goals in 24 games during the domestic season.

"I am playing in the one of the best championships in Asia," says Djeparov. You should be always be 100% ready."

Djeparov also scored six goals in the previous domestic campaign for Seongnam, with both returns his best for several seasons.

And Uzbekistan will be hoping the veteran playmaker can continue that form in Australia having scored two goals against the hosts and Kuwait in Qatar four years ago.

"New matches and tournaments will always help you to forget previous defeats. It gives you new motivation," says Djeparov.

"I want to play well and to be top scorer of the Asian Cup."



GREAT EXPECTATIONS

QATAR ARRIVE IN AUSTRALIA AS THE NEWLY CROWNED GULF CUP CHAMPIONS HOPING TO BUILD ON THEIR RUN TO THE QUARTER-FINALS AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP IN 2011. AND HELMED BY COACH DJAMEL BELMADI WHO HAS ENJOYED STELLAR SUCCESS IN FOUR YEARS IN QATARI FOOTBALL, OPTIMISM IS HIGH AHEAD OF THE CONTINENTAL CHAMPIONSHIP IN JANUARY.

By: Daniel Pordes • Photos: World Sport Group







Ever since former Marseille midfielder Djamel Belmadi landed in Qatar to take up his first managerial role in 2010 at just 34 years of age, the Algerian coach has proved to have a touch as golden as that which he possessed as a player roaming the field of the Stade Velodrome.

Consecutive titles in 2011 and 2012 with newly promoted Qatar Stars League side Lekhwiya, the first and second top flight championships in the club's history, were much acclaimed in the Arab country and duly led to Belmadi's involvement with the Qatar national team where he has enjoyed similar success adding the 2013/14 WAFF Championship and 2014 Gulf Cup to his resume in just over a year within the national set-up.

Qualification for AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 was achieved under predecessor Fahad Thani, but Belmadi oversaw a run of 12 matches with just one defeat after taking charge of the senior side in March which culminated in November's Gulf Cup success.

"Our expectations are high and we want to do our best in Australia and make a good performance," says Belmadi.

"Nobody can say, except for teams like

Australia who are the hosts, Japan and Korea Republic, that they have the expectation to win the title.

"Australia are playing at home in front of their fans, Japan are defending champions and want to win once more, and also there is Korea who took part in the last World Cup along with Iran.

"But, even so, for me there are no favourites. In this competition, I can't say that there is one team who has the best chance to win the title.

"All I know is that, I have an ambition: to win the title with my team. We have big ambitions and we have a target to win the Asian Cup. The team will prepare well and if we have a good tournament, we can reach the target of winning the title."

Having revolutionised Lekhwiya into a title-winning domestic force, Belmadi was appointed coach of the Qatar B team in December 2013 and duly went about reforming the Qatari development side, bringing in talented youngsters that included forward Boualem Khoukhi and midfielder Karim Boudiaf.

And at the WAFF Championship, just weeks after Belmadi had taken charge, Qatar proved a revelation as they were crowned champions, going undefeated with 10 goals scored – Koukhi netting six of them to be named the tournament's Top Scorer – and just a single

goal conceded.

Belmadi's success with the reserve side resulted in his appointment to the helm of the senior team, taking over from interim coach Thani in March following disappointment in the 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

Although Qatar's passage to the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 had been relatively smooth under Thani, as they qualified for the finals with some comfort as runners-up from Group D, Belmadi's Midas touch and familiarity with the local football scene proved hard to resist for the Qatar Football Association.

"It is important to know the players of the league because all of the national team players come from the Qatari league and no one is playing abroad," says Belmadi, who also played in Qatar's domestic league for two seasons with Al Gharafa and Al Kharaitiyat SC.

"Therefore, I think we saved a lot of time through me already knowing the players and we didn't need to test a lot of players and thereby waste time, and I think this was a real advantage for Qatar and me when it came to taking the senior team job."

With a good performance in November's Gulf Cup a fundamental part of Belmadi's job description, the Algerian began his tenure in moderate form in the months leading up to the regional championship in Saudi Arabia with



Far Left Belmadi was appointed Qatar coach in March 2014.

Left Belmadi previously led Qatar's Lekhwiya to back-to-back Qatar Stars League titles.

Top Belmadi guided Qatar to victory in the 2014 Gulf Cup.

draws against Indonesia and Morocco before a home defeat to Peru.

But a month before the Gulf Cup was due to begin, Qatar enjoyed a run of four impressive victories, three of them against fellow AFC Asian Cup sides.

A convincing 3-0 defeat of 2011 semi-finalists Uzbekistan in Doha was followed by a 5-0 drubbing of Lebanon before a stunning 1-0 win against AFC Asian Cup hosts Australia, which was the Socceroos' first ever loss to the Middle East nation coming courtesy of a second half goal from AFC Player of the Year nominee Khalfan Ibrahim.

The visit of DPR Korea to Doha a week before the home side's short trip to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cup brought another confidence-boosting win as Abdulqadir Ilyas, Khouki and Abdelkarim Hassan were all on target during a 3-1 victory.

And although Qatar only scraped through the group stage of the Gulf Cup after sharing draws with the hosts, Yemen and Bahrain, the side hit form when it mattered.

A come-from-behind victory over Oman in the semi-final set the stage for a re-match

with home side Saudi Arabia in the final showpiece, and despite again going a goal down after Saud Kariri's 16th opener, a quick response two minutes later from Almahdi Ali restored parity before Khoukhi netted the winner just before the hour mark.

"The Gulf Cup was important for us because we will play in the Asian Cup against two teams who were at the Gulf Cup. So we know them, but the thing is that they know us too. It will be tough," says Belmadi, whose Qatar side will face the United Arab Emirates and Iran and Bahrain in Group C in Australia.

"All three teams have good qualities in our group: Iran qualified to the last World Cup, the Emirates won the 2013 Gulf Cup and we drew with Bahrain in the 2014 Gulf Cup.

"While it will be important to start the tournament well to give confidence to the players, it is sure to be a tough group.

"We know that every game will be difficult. Every team will be difficult for us, but we hope we will be also difficult for them."

The Gulf side's history at the AFC Asian Cup first began in 1980, but five consecutive group stage exits followed as well as a failed

qualification campaign in 1996 before Qatar finally advanced to the knockout stage for the first time in 2000 in Lebanon where they were eliminated in the quarter-finals by China.

Group stage exits followed in 2004 and 2007, before on home soil in 2011, Qatar rose to the challenge and returned to the quarter-finals.

And even though a fairytale semi-final appearance failed to materialise, their 3-2 defeat by eventual champions Japan in the last eight will live long in the memory.

"I hope that we can at least repeat the achievement of reaching the quarter-final that we had in 2011. But the difference from four years ago is that we have a lot of new players," says Belmadi.

"For those players who remain from 2011, it is a good experience that they can share with the other players. And it is a good challenge for the new players when they know that in the last tournament we reached the quarter-finals and they will have the desire to do the same at least.

"It could put pressure on us, but I will take it in a different way: it is more of a target for us; a good pressure.

"I'm not afraid of giving some targets. We want to do at least the same and why not more?"

POWER AND STRENGTH

ISMAIL AHMED WAS EVER-PRESENT AS AL AIN REACHED THE SEMI-FINALS OF THE 2014 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE, AN ACHIEVEMENT THAT HELPED EARN THE TOWERING CENTRE-BACK SECOND PLACE IN THE VOTING FOR AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR. AND HAVING SUCCESSFULLY CEMENTED HIS SPOT FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AHMED IS EAGERLY ANTICIPATING HIS FIRST TASTE OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP.

By: Daniel Pordes • Photo: World Sport Group

Nearly four inches taller than the next largest player at club side Al Ain, Ismail Ahmed, at 6'4", has been a giant of the United Arab Emirates top flight since his professional debut six years ago.

However, with 2014 proving to be a banner year for the 31-year-old defender, with continental recognition and acclaim of his talents coming at November's AFC Annual Awards, Ahmed can now convincingly justify that term figuratively as well as literally.

Runner-up in the voting for the AFC Player of the Year accolade, the Moroccan-born centre-back was the dependable rock in the Al Ain backline, starting all 12 games in their run to a first AFC Champions League semi-final appearance in nine years.

A classy and composed defender, Ahmed provided security for Al Ain's dynamic forward line as well as a threat inside the penalty area, scoring against Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad in the quarter-final first leg with a smartly taken volley.

Despite enjoying domestic success, inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain had seen their last four continental tournaments end in consecutive group stage eliminations with their last appearance amongst Asia's final four coming in the 2005 edition.

And Ahmed had first-hand experience of three of those four curtailed campaigns turning out for Al Ain in the 2010, 2011, and 2013 tournaments.

"This year I worked hard, performed well, and learnt from previous lessons and was very happy to be nominated amongst the last three players for the AFC Player of the Year award," says Ahmed.

"Playing for Al Ain who are a big team,

motivated me to reach a high technical standard and individual skill.

"Whenever I am on the field, I gave all my power and my strength to play well for the fans, team-mates and directors of the team as I am really lucky to play for them."

The 2014 continental campaign, though, ended at the semi-final stages as Al Ain fell short of following up their 2003 success with Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal claiming 4-2 aggregate victory.

"For sure, being eliminated from the AFC Champions League at the semi-final stage and not being able to play in the final affected our team. It was really disappointing after playing so well in the group stage and the previous knockout rounds and then being eliminated at the semi-final," he says.

"Our fans were demanding strongly for us to win the ACL trophy, but unfortunately we did not perform well in the semi-final and we did not win.

"In football sometimes you make mistakes, but you still learn from the mistakes or at least try to eliminate the mistakes.

"We will learn from this and the Al Ain team will perform better and better to reflect the good image of the UAE's teams in the 2015 AFC Champions League."

Al Ain's exploits on the continent are, though, an indicator of the continued rise in Emirati football as a burgeoning Asian power.

An undefeated qualification campaign for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 will bring the UAE its ninth appearance at the continental finals and, amongst those in the Gulf nation, there is real hope that the side can match or even top their best-ever finish in the AFC Asian Cup: a runners-up finish at the 1996 edition.

The run to the final heralded the end of what was then considered the golden generation of the UAE, with many of the

squad having represented the country when they qualified for the finals of the FIFA World Cup in Italy in 1990.

In 1992 the UAE reached the semi-finals, but otherwise the Emirates have a modest record at the AFC Asian Cup, first qualifying in 1980 and in all but 1992 and 1996, the team failed to progress beyond the group stage.

Tasked with the Australia campaign is coach Mahdi Ali, a central figure in the UAE's developmental sides before he took over the senior team mantle in August 2012.

Ali had led the UAE U-23 national team to the 2012 Olympic Games before then guiding his nation to only their second Gulf Cup title in 2013 and a third place finish in the most recent edition in late November.

And having broken into the squad at the tail end of 2013, Ahmed has enjoyed an extended run in the UAE side in 2014 including starts against Uzbekistan, Lithuania and Paraguay as well as the third place play-off against Oman at the Gulf Cup.

"In my opinion, this is a new golden generation of Emirati football. Not only is the league in the UAE strong, but the national team is strong too with the team developing slowly but surely," says Ahmed.

"And the upcoming generation could be even better than the current team. With academies installed at all the teams in the UAE top flight, I am expecting some new players coming forward over the next few years with the junior teams playing really well.

"That is for the future, our next challenge for the present, though, is the AFC Asian Cup in Australia and it will not be an easy task.

"The people in the UAE expect a lot from us and demand us to win trophies to match the great teams of the past.

"So we are going to Australia determined to represent our country well, make our fans and people happy and win the trophy."



LEADING BY EXAMPLE

TSUNEYASU MIYAMOTO'S CAPTAINCY PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN JAPAN'S VICTORY AT THE 2004 AFC ASIAN CUP IN CHINA AS THE SAMURAI BLUE OVERCAME HOSTILE CROWDS AND THE LOSS OF KEY PLAYERS. ONE INCIDENT, THOUGH, STANDS OUT ABOVE ALL OTHERS.

By: Michael Church Photos: World Sport Group

For anyone who does not know his story, Tsuneyasu Miyamoto has a way of introducing himself at seminars and functions before addressing a room; featuring a specially cut video, there is one scene which, when viewed, leaves audiences in no doubt, not just over his identity, but his unquestionable leadership skills.

The footage comes from a unique set of circumstances that occurred a little over a decade ago and which earned Miyamoto global fame, the respect of his peers and, for him and his Japan team-mates, a place in the semi-finals of the 2004 AFC Asian Cup.

No one who was present, or who witnessed the game on television, will forget the remarkable scenes. Defending champions Japan, taken

to a penalty shootout by tournament debutants Jordan, were staring elimination squarely in the face. Shunsuke Nakamura and Alessandro Santos had missed Japan's first two spot-kicks and elimination looked a distinct possibility.

Up stepped Miyamoto, Japan's captain for the tournament, approaching Malaysian referee Subkhiddin Mohd Salleh respectfully but assertively requesting he inspect the turf around the penalty spot in the Chongqing Olympic Sports Center. Both Nakamura and Alex's standing foot – both of whom were left-footed players – had given way on the substandard surface causing both to miss.

Subkhiddin looked, pondered, and then approached the match commissioner before sanctioning a shift to the goal at the other end to complete the shootout. Jordan, unsettled by







the change, lost their momentum, and their nerve, and Japan went on to win, fittingly enough with Miyamoto scoring his country's last penalty after Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi had saved two of the four penalties eventually missed by the Middle Eastern side.

"I didn't underestimate Jordan," says Miyamoto 10 years on from those incredible scenes that kept Japan's quest for a second title alive and set up a semi-final with Bahrain. "When I saw their games, they were OK and quite good. I saw a few good players in terms of technique and speed.

"Beforehand I analysed their game and had a lot of solutions for playing against them. The first goal was made by our mistake on the right side, they got the ball and delivered the cross and there was a header. It was in the first 15 minutes, so I thought we would have enough time to equalise, so we didn't panic. Then, we were able to equalise soon after, so it was 1-1 against Jordan. And that's fine.

"It was possible we would go to a penalty shootout, and that was OK because we had Yoshikatsu. But in extra-time we were so exhausted. I was satisfied with the result.

"I don't like penalties and I was

appointed as the seventh taker, so I was relaxed and didn't expect that I would have to take a penalty. But something happened, Shunsuke shot over the bar, and I could easily imagine that Alex would have the same problem.

"I made a decision beforehand; I would go to the referee and ask him to change the side if Alex missed. It was a quick decision, but it was deserved.

"I didn't expect the referee to change the side; I just wanted to win the game. In order to disturb the Jordan players, that was my tactic. It worked, because of Yoshikatsu.

"I scored, so I was happy, but that was the turning point. It was controversial, but it went well and everybody remembers, even now. When I have lectures in front of many people I introduce myself with the video including this game and everyone remembers. This is my history."

Miyamoto's own story is a significant one; he was a key member of the Gamba Osaka side that would go on to win the J.League title in 2005 before moving to Europe to win the Austrian title with Red Bull Salzburg, but it was at the FIFA World Cup on home soil in 2002 that he really came to prominence.

Drafted into the team by then-coach

Philippe Troussier to replace the injured Ryuzo Moroka early in the first half of nation's opening game against Belgium, Miyamoto – complete with his face-protecting mask which drew the attention of fans and photographers alike – became a star overnight.

By the time China 2004 arrived, Miyamoto had become captain under new coach Zico, but Japan were still finding their feet under the Brazilian and the hostile atmosphere they faced in China could have broken the team. Instead, the greater the hostility, the more galvanized the Japanese became.

Having advanced ahead of Iran, Oman and Thailand from the group stage, and defeated Jordan in the quarter-finals following that penalty shootout, Bahrain were up next, another tough challenge.

Yasuhito Endo's sending off five minutes before half-time in Jinan as Japan trailed 1-0 thanks to a goal by Ala'a Hubail left the champions facing an even sterner test.

"We got used to the challenges, playing in China," says Miyamoto. "It was difficult, right from the first game. The game against Jordan was hard and after the game against Iran in the group stages we had some issues with transportation back



to the hotel, someone attacked our bus.

"We saw many difficulties for us, they happened and I couldn't change those. So, against Bahrain, let's play 10 against 11. It's fine. The score was 1-0, I think.

"I just concentrated on the game, and tried to control my team-mates. The first half they scored, then Koji Nakata was substituted and he equalised with a header. The second half was terrible for us, especially the defence."

Nakata had netted just after half-time before Keiji Tamada somehow put Japan in front in the 55th minute. Another goal from Hubail plus a strike five minutes from time by Duaij Naser left Japan in desperate straits, staring at elimination once again. Defender Yuji Nakazawa, however, came to the rescue, scoring with a header in the 90th minute to take the game into extra-time.

"In a way, I enjoyed the game because the atmosphere amongst the players was so good on the pitch," says Miyamoto. "When Norihiro Nishi was coming on to the pitch, the other substitutes are supporting him and when I saw them I knew I had to give my all to win this game. There was so much emotion.

"In extra-time, Tamada was superb, he was so quick. He was the best. Bahrain

Far Left At the 2004 AFC Asian Cup in China

Above & Right Miyamoto attended the Tokyo leg of the trophy tour ahead of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

could have won the game, but surprisingly we got through.

"Our target was to play against China in the final in Beijing. Everybody booed us, so we were so motivated to play against China. The time has come! We knew we would win the game, because of this. We had to."

That victory set up a long-awaited match-up between the defending champions and the tournament hosts. Expectation on both sides was high, but it was Japan who took the lead through Takashi Fukunishi before Li Ming levelled for China.

Nakata netted a controversial second for Japan in the second half, the ball appearing to go in off his hand before Tamada wrapped it up late in the game.

Japan had triumphed, not only against the best in Asia but to the chagrin of more than a billion Chinese football fans.

"The atmosphere was always very harsh towards Japan from the Chinese fans during that tournament," says Miyamoto. "We just wanted to win; I just

wanted to raise the Asian Cup.

"The nervousness was not there before the final. We were very confident. We knew the result. Honestly. The Chinese were under pressure as host country and many people would be cheering them, so it was obvious.

"We knew we were going to make it. Fukunishi's goal was a good goal, then they equalised, but it was 1-1 so it was OK. Then Koji scored. We need that kind of luck in order to win the title. Luck is needed.

"And then we won. I was relieved because at that time I realised I was under pressure, but we all hugged each other. Zico was happy. Everybody, not only the players who played but the others too, were so happy. They were very proud of the team. It was a good atmosphere.

"We had a good team, good players and were well balanced. We had Toshiya Fujita, Atsuhiko Miura, Takuya Yamada on the bench. These three players contributed to getting the title, I need to say that.

"We had luck, motivation, drama, and Yoshikatsu – I have to say that. There were a lot of elements. When I see the picture of me raising the Cup, I'm so proud. It's a big part of my life but I don't see that picture that often."

HOPES OF A NATION

ASHRAF NU'MAN'S GOAL IN THE 2014 FINAL AFC CHALLENGE CUP SECURED PALESTINE'S FIRST-EVER AFC ASIAN CUP APPEARANCE, AND DESPITE THE MUCH-TRIOUBLED NATION HEADING TO AUSTRALIA AS A CLEAR UNDERDOG, THE VERSATILE SAUDI ARABIA-BASED MIDFIELDER-TURNED-STRIKER HAS HIGH HOPES.

By: Andrew Mullen • Photo: World Sport Group

Playing out-of-position for an understrength side affected by much-publicised ongoing problems in their homeland, Ashraf Nu'man's winning goal against the Philippines in the final of May's AFC Challenge Cup not only secured Palestine's first-ever appearance at the AFC Asian Cup, but also delivered welcome relief to a conflict-ravaged nation.

Without six recognised strikers who were unable to make the trip to the Maldives due to travel restrictions, Taraji Wadi Al Nes midfielder Nu'man was asked to play as a striker by then coach Jamal Mahmoud as Palestine sought to secure the 16th and final berth at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

And he duly delivered with a goal in the 2-0 win over Myanmar in the group stage as Palestine topped the table with an unbeaten record ahead of the Maldives before Nu'man netted twice in the semi-final success over reigning SAFF Champions Afghanistan.

But Nu'man had saved his best until last as his fourth goal in five games in the Maldives arrived after 59 minutes of the final against the Philippines, who had beaten Palestine in the third place play-off of the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup.

With Palestine not having conceded a goal up to the final at the National Stadium in Male after also beating Kyrgyzstan and drawing with the Maldives in the group stage, one goal in the final was likely to be enough for Mahmoud's side despite the considerable threat posed by the Philippines.

And that proved to be the case as Nu'man expertly swung a free-kick from just outside the penalty area over the Philippines wall and past goalkeeper Roland Muller.

"The goal in the final of the AFC Challenge Cup means a lot to me; it's the most precious goal in my football life because through it I had the opportunity to make all

the Palestinian people happy especially under the difficult circumstances that we are suffering," says Nu'man, who scored once in five games for Palestine at the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup in Nepal.

"I am so excited to play in the Asian Cup because this is the first time in Palestine's history and I consider it as an important achievement for Palestinian football.

"We have not just qualified to participate, we hope to qualify for the second round and through this we can transfer our message to the world that despite our difficulties, we will continue in this way."

The goal saw Nu'man named the tournament's top scorer ahead of Maldives captain Ali Ashfaq, and having helped unfancied Taraji Wadi Al Nes win the 2013/14 West Bank Premier League, he joined Saudi Arabian side Al Faisaly ahead of the 2014/15 season.

And Nu'man quickly made an impact for his new employers with both goals, which both came in first half stoppage time, as Al Faisaly beat Al Fateh on just his second outing in the Saudi Arabian top flight.

"I don't have many problems playing in different positions," says Nu'man. "I have the potential to allow me to play in all positions."

With Nu'man changing clubs, Palestine also saw a change in the dugout as Mahmoud resigned for personal reasons following September's Peace Cup in the Philippines to be replaced by former assistant Ahmed Al Hassan.

But even with over three months to prepare for their AFC Asian Cup debut, a Palestine side who will be one of the lowest ranked teams on show in Australia know the tough task they face, especially having been handed a Group D opener against defending champions Japan before subsequent meetings with Jordan and 2007 winners Iraq.

"It's an honour not just for me, but for all

the technical staff and players in the national team as we will play against important and strong teams like Japan, Jordan and Iraq who have all the possibilities," says Nu'man.

"But for us, the qualification to this championship brought Palestine's national team to the attention of an international audience and that helps to motivate us to show our best during the AFC Asian Cup."

Under Al Hassan, Palestine will begin their campaign with the daunting task of facing four-time winners Japan at Newcastle Stadium on 12 January.

"The match against Japan will be difficult especially because Japan are considered one of the best teams in Asia," says Nu'man.

"They are a team that has a lot of potential which is more than us, but we will do everything we can to play with a high level."

Palestine, who only claimed their first-ever win at the WAFF Championship in 2012 after beating Lebanon 1-0 in Kuwait City, will then face 2014 FIFA World Cup intercontinental play-off representatives Jordan at Melbourne Rectangular Stadium four days later before rounding off their campaign against 2007 champions Iraq in Canberra on 20 January.

"Against Jordan and Iraq, they will be important matches for us," says Nu'man.

"I hope that we can win in these matches because these are the critical matches although these teams are at a high level."

The step up in class will be severe, there is no doubt in that, but if their AFC Challenge Cup performance is anything to go by, Palestine will not just be in Australia to simply make up the numbers having only lost 2-0 to eventual Gulf Cup finalists and three-time Asian champions Saudi Arabia in a friendly at the start of November.

"During this championship we will show the world that Palestine can play at a high level like the other teams," says Nu'man.

"We hope for positive results especially because we have been planning and preparing perfectly."





Western Sydney Land Historic Title



AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL 2014



Western Sydney Wanderers became the first Australian side to be crowned Asian champions after the continental debutants edged out two-time winners Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia 1-0 on aggregate in the two-legged final of the AFC Champions League.

Tomi Juric's 64th minute strike in October's first leg at Parramatta Stadium had given Tony Popovic's Western Sydney a crucial lead to take to the return meeting in Riyadh a week later.

And it proved enough as two-time Asian Club Championship winners Al Hilal failed to convert a dominant performance at the King Fahd International Stadium into a breakthrough as Western Sydney held on to become the first A-League side to lift the AFC Champions League title.

"The game was everything you expect from a final. It was difficult. They are a very good team, they had fantastic support, but

we are an excellent team and we showed over two legs how good we are," said Western Sydney coach Popovic following the second leg.

"The first time in the competition, to win it, I think in the future we will really understand how special this run has been and how it was to win this title."

With Western Sydney's impressive home record helping them dispose of the likes of J.League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima, defending champions Guangzhou Evergrande from China and 2013 runners-up FC Seoul from Korea Republic en route to the final, expectations were high ahead of the first leg at Parramatta Stadium.

And the capacity crowd were not disappointed as Australia international Juric stepped off the bench midway through the second half of the first leg to stab home Antony Golec's cross for the game's only goal just after the hour mark.

Al Hilal had controlled possession up to that point, but the visitors struggled in the final third and Juric almost doubled Western Sydney's advantage with an effort from the edge of the area that hit the post.

Western Sydney did have to endure several nervous moments in the closing stages, but goalkeeper Ante Covic preserved the slender advantage as a frustrated Al Hilal suffered a second consecutive defeat in the competition.

"It was a real battle. They're a very good side, we can't doubt that, but we showed we're a good side as well, getting that goal and having a few chances to go 2-0 up. That would have been the icing on the cake," said Popovic following the first leg.

"We had to be very resolute against a very good team and this has given us a chance to win the final."

And in the return fixture in front of a 63,763 crowd at the King Fahd International Stadium, Al Hilal once more dominated for the majority of the match but Western Sydney were again indebted to tournament MVP Covic as the veteran custodian heroically kept his ninth cleansheet of the campaign with a number of key saves.

None more crucial than his stop from substitute Yasser Al Kahtani inside the final five minutes as the 39-year-old threw himself backwards to produce a superb one-handed reflex save to deny the Al Hilal forward from point blank range.

And with the Saudi Arabian side unable to find a breakthrough, Juric's first leg goal ultimately proved the difference as Al Hilal missed out on joining Korea's Pohang Steelers as the only three-time Asian champions.

"We had bad luck and we had many chances. We were the best team over the two games," said Al Hilal coach Laurentiu Reghecampf following the second leg.

"If you lose one game when you play bad, you can congratulate the other team. But when you play how we played and they play how they played, we feel very bad.

"We had a lot of chances but we missed them. If the ball does not come to our strikers they cannot score and that's why we have to find a balance between attack and defence.

"I think the fans saw what we did in this match. The players tried their best. We didn't deserve to lose this game."

Al Ain's Asamoah Gyan, meanwhile, was named the AFC Champions League top goalscorer after netting 12 goals for the semi-finalists from the United Arab Emirates after Al Hilal striker Nassir Al Shamrani was unable to add to his 10 goal tally over either leg of the final.



| SEMI-FINALS | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Western Sydney  FC Seoul | | Al Hilal  Al Ain  | |
| 2-0 | | 4-2 | |
| Western Sydney Wanderers win 2-0 on aggregate | | Al Hilal win 4-2 on aggregate | |
| 17/09/14 FC Seoul 0 Western Sydney Wanderers 0 | 01/10/14 Western Sydney Wanderers 2 (Mateo Poljak 3, Shannon Cole 64) FC Seoul 0 | 16/09/14 Al Hilal 3 (Nassir Al Shamrani 61, 64, Thiago Neves 70) Al Ain 0 | 30/09/14 Al Ain 2 (Lee Myung-joo 10, Jires Kembo-Ekoko 78) Al Hilal 1 (Nassir Al Shamrani 66) |
| Seoul World Cup Stadium, Seoul | Parramatta Stadium, Sydney | King Fahd International Stadium, Riyadh | Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain |
| FINAL | | | |
| Western Sydney  Al Hilal  | | | |
| 1-0 | | | |
| Western Sydney Wanderers win 1-0 on aggregate | | | |
| 25/10/14 Western Sydney Wanderers 1 (Tomi Juric 64) Al Hilal 0 | | 01/11/14 Al Hilal 0 Western Sydney Wanderers 0 | |
| Parramatta Stadium, Sydney Attendance : 20,053 | | King Fahd International Stadium, Riyadh Attendance : 63,763 | |



Spot On Al Qadsia Finally Claim AFC Cup Crown



Danijel Subotic scored the vital spot kick as Kuwait's Al Qadsia claimed the AFC Cup for the first time in their third appearance in the final in five years following a 4-2 penalty shootout win over Iraq's Arbil at Maktoum Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Stadium in October.

The Swiss striker clinched the title for the Kuwaiti club to keep the trophy in the Gulf state just 12 months after losing in the final to compatriots Kuwait Sports Club.

Al Qadsia were crowned champions after the final ended scoreless following 120 minutes and goalkeeper Nawaf Al Khaldi set-up Subotic to win the title for Al Qadsia after saving Ali Faez Atiyah's effort in the penultimate round.

Dhary Saeed and Hawar Mohammed missed for Al Qadsia and Arbil respectively after Bader Al Mutawa and Amjad Rahdi had both scored in the opening round of spot kicks before Al Khaldi dived full length to his right to push Atiyah's attempt wide of

the goal.

"I think this is a very, very big result, I'm very happy for my players, the managers of the club, the group and all the Qadsia fans. This is fantastic," said Al Qadsia's Spanish coach Antonio Puche following the final in Dubai.

"The game was a difficult game and Arbil are a fantastic team, as I said in the press conference before the game. They had a fantastic defence, they were very well organised.

"Sometimes in the second half it was difficult for us. After that we improved and we had three or four chances to score that were clear, and in extra-time also. But to win the game is the most important for me."

Al Qadsia playmaker Saif Al Hashan claimed the AFC Cup's Most Valuable Player Award after a campaign that saw the 24-year-old instrumental as the Kuwaiti club finally landed the trophy having twice finished as runners-up after losing in 2010 to Syria's Al Ittihad before finishing second best to Kuwait Sports Club last season.

"I'm very happy for this great achievement and I'd like to thank everyone who has worked with me, all of the coaches, everyone in the administration, the medical department, everyone," said Al Hashan, who scored twice as Al Qadsia beat Indonesia's Persipura Jayapura 10-2 on aggregate in the semi-finals. "I'm very happy."

Al Qadsia had started the final well and dictated the tempo of the opening half, although they created little despite their dominance as Al Mutawa, Al Hashan and Alvaro Silva Linares failed to test Arbil goalkeeper Jalal Hassan.

It was Al Mutawa, though, who should

have rewarded Al Qadsia's superiority just before the half hour mark only for Hassan to spread himself well to block the goal-bound effort following Al Hashan's through ball.

Al Qadsia goalkeeper Al Khaldi was called into action towards the end of the first half to save from Radhi's low free-kick before, at the other end, both Subotic and Al Mutawa drew saves from Hassan in the Arbil goal.

The stifling heat and humidity took its toll in the second half as both teams struggled to find any fluency after the restart with Al Mutawa's low effort easily collected by Hassan just after the hour mark before Rahdi wasted a good chance for Arbil with 20 minutes remaining.

But the game eventually headed for extra-time after Arbil duo Victor Ormazabal and Halkor Mulla Mohammad Taher failed to convert further chances inside the final 15 minutes of normal time.

And after dominating extra-time as Subotic and Al Mutawa squandered more opportunities, Al Qadsia emerged victorious following 120 goalless minutes to hand Arbil a second runner-up finish in three years having lost the 2012 final to Kuwait Sports Club.

"In the first half, Al Qadsia played the better football, but in the second half we did well, and also in extra time. But when it goes to penalties, this is what happens in football so congratulations to Al Qadsia club," said Arbil coach Ayoub Barcham following the final defeat.

"With the Kuwaiti clubs, we are unlucky and we're disappointed, but there's nothing we can do about it now."



SEMI-FINALS

Arbil v Kitchee

16/09/14

Arbil 1 (Luay Salah 59) **Kitchee 1** (Juan Belencoso 68)

30/09/14

Kitchee 1 (Gao Wen 69) **Arbil 2** (Ali Faez 3, Amjed Radhi 9)

Arbil win 3-2 on aggregate

Al Qadsia v Persipura Jayapura

16/09/14

Al Qadsia 4 (Danijel Subotic 11, 77, Saif Al Hashan 64, Bader Al Mutawa 65) **Persipura Jayapura 2** (Titus Bonai 21, Boaz Solossa 31)

30/09/14

Persipura Jayapura 0 Al Qadsia 6 (Saif Al Hashan 5, Bader Al Mutawa 33, 73, Saleh Al Sheikh 56, 90+2, Fahed Al Ebrahim 75)

Al Qadsia win 10-2 on aggregate

FINAL



Al Qadsia v Arbil AET
0-0



Al Qadsia win 4-2 on penalties



Qatar Claim Maiden U-19 Crown

Substitute Akram Afif scored the only goal as Qatar claimed a maiden AFC U-19 Championship title after edging out DPR Korea 1-0 in the final at Thuwunna Youth Training Centre Stadium at the end of October to complete an unbeaten record.

Afif, who had started from the bench in every game he played in Myanmar, netted his fourth goal of the campaign with a header from a corner seven minutes after half-time to end DPR Korea's hopes of a fourth title.

Qatar had earlier topped Group D with an unbeaten record ahead of DPR Korea before edging out China and hosts Myanmar – following a thrilling 3-2 victory after extra-time – in the knockout stage to claim their first continental title since winning the AFC U-16 Championship in 1990.

"I'm very happy for this incredible achievement, especially for the players who have shown a great attitude throughout and were a pleasure to work with during this whole tournament," said Qatar coach Felix Sanchez,

who also saw his side qualify for the 2015 FIFA U-20 World Cup alongside DPR Korea, Myanmar and Uzbekistan.

"What we achieved is amazing; we knew that it was a good opportunity for us to end this title drought. The players did everything to win this championship for themselves and for the country of Qatar.

"We played six difficult games, and with each game we faced different tough scenarios. In the first game we had to come back from 1-0 down, then the same against Iraq, and a hard game with Oman, but the team showed hard work and came back each time.

"In the quarter-final against China they were nervous because of the available ticket for the 2015 FIFA U-20 World Cup for the winner, but again the players showed a great performance. And against Myanmar in the semi-final at a packed stadium it was an incredible environment, and we came back to get a result again – that shows the spirit and great attitude of these players."

Having lost 3-1 to Qatar, DPR Korea were able to recover and claimed second place in

Group B following a 1-1 draw with Oman and 2-1 win over Iraq.

An Ye-gun's side then edged out Japan 5-4 on penalties following a 1-1 draw after extra-time in their quarter-final before the 1976, 2006 and 2010 champions eased to a 5-0 success over Uzbekistan to earn a return to the final for a fifth time.

But in the final, forwards Jo Sol-song and Jo Kwang-myong both wasted golden opportunities to open the scoring in the first half before struggling to create further meaningful openings following Afif's header.

"We had a lot of chances in the first half but we just couldn't take them. If we could have scored just one of them it would have brought more strength to the players, but it wasn't meant to be," said coach An.

Qatar captain Ahmad Moein was named the tournament's MVP, while team mate Ahmed Al Sadi claimed the Top Scorer accolade after netting five goals, with the Belgium-based forward edging out DPR Korea's Jo and Uzbekistan striker Zabikhillo Urinboev by virtue of a superior assist record.





Group A

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|
| Thailand | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 6 | -1 | 6 |
| Myanmar | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Yemen | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Iran | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 3 |

09/10/14

Myanmar 0 Yemen 0

Iran 1 (Amir Mohammad Mazloum 15) Thailand 2 (Tanasith Siripala 65 Chenrop Samphaodi 82)

11/10/14

Yemen 1 (Ahmed Al Sarori 6) Iran 0

Thailand 0 Myanmar 3 (Nyein Chan Aung 13, 18, Aung Thu 42)

13/10/14

Myanmar 0 Iran 2 (Yousef Seyyedi 56, Sadegh Moharrami 83)

Thailand 3 (Patipan Pinsermsootsri 40, 85, 88)

Yemen 2 (Khaled Mahdi 1, Gehad Ahmed 64)

Group B

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|
| UAE | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| Uzbekistan | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 5 |
| Australia | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Indonesia | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 8 | -6 | 0 |

10/10/14

Uzbekistan 3 (Dostonbek Khamdamov 18, Zabikhillo Urinboev 22, Otabek Shukurov 87)

Indonesia 1 (Paulo Sitanggang 58)

Australia 1 (Brandon Borrello 79) UAE 1 (Khalfan Al Shamsi 85)

12/10/14

Indonesia 0 Australia 1 (Jaushua Sotirio 67)

UAE 2 (Abdalla Al Alawi 25, Ahmed Al Hashmi 90+3) Uzbekistan 2 (Eldor Shomurodov 44, Zabikhillo Urinboev 53)

14/10/14

Uzbekistan 1 (Zabikhillo Urinboev 82) Australia 1 (Stefan Mauk 66)

UAE 4 (Mohamed Al Akberi 11, Ahmed Al Hashmi 22, Saeed Hassan 50, Ahmed Gheilani 79)

Indonesia 1 (Muhamad Drajad 52)

Group C

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|----|-----|-----|
| Japan | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| China | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Korea Republic | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| Vietnam | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 10 | -8 | 1 |

09/10/14

Korea Republic 6 (Lee Jeong-bin 45, Kim Gun-hee 55, 90+1, Shim Je-hyeok 60, Hwang Hee-chan 66, Paik Seung-ho 77) Vietnam 0

Japan 1 (Takumi Minamino 16) China 2 (Wei Shihao 1, 77)

11/10/14

Vietnam 1 (Hoang Thanh Tung 90) Japan 3 (Masaya Okugawa 59, Shinnosuke Nakatani 90+4, Yosuke Ideguchi 90+6)

China 0 Korea Republic 0

13/10/14

Korea Republic 1 (Kim Gun-hee 29) Japan 2 (Takumi Minamino 13, 65)

China 1 (Tang Shi 88) Vietnam 1 (Hoang Thanh Tung 20)

Group D

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|
| Qatar | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 7 |
| DPR Korea | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | -1 | 4 |
| Iraq | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| Oman | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 9 | -8 | 1 |

10/10/14

Iraq 6 (Emad Majeed 7, 43, Ali Al Shiyadi 27 OG, Sherko Kareem 74, Layth Asal 85, Aymen Hussein 89) Oman 0

DPR Korea 1 (Jo Kwang-myong 5) Qatar 3 (Ahmed Al Sadi 74, Ali Al Moez 79, Akram Afif 86)

12/10/14

Oman 1 (Marwan Mubarak 72) DPR Korea 1 (So Jong-hyok 89)

Qatar 1 (Ahmed Al Sadi 51) Iraq 1 (Bashar Bonyan 39)

14/10/14

Iraq 1 (Ali Mhwai 90+3) DPR Korea 2 (Jo Kwang-myong 50, Kim Yu-song 63)

Qatar 2 (Ahmed Al Sadi 58, 65) Oman 0

Quarter-Finals

17/10/14

Thailand 1 (Chenrop Samphaodi 48) Uzbekistan 2 (Zabikhillo Urinboev 6, 20)

UAE 0 Myanmar 1 (Than Paing 53)

Japan 1 (Takumi Minamino 83) DPR Korea 1 (Kim Kuk-chol 36) AET

DPR Korea win 5-4 on penalties

Qatar 4 (Ahmed Al Sadi 6, Akram Afif 45+5)

Ahmad Doozandeh 58, Ali Al Moez 90+6) China 2 (Gui Hong 54, Wei Jingzong 86)

Semi-Finals

20/10/14

Uzbekistan 0 DPR Korea 5 (Jo Kwang-myong 5, 39, 63, Kim Yu-song 70, So Jong-hyok 73)

Myanmar 2 (Aung Thu 62, Nyein Chan Aung 64)

Qatar 3 (Ali Al Moez 45+1, Akram Afif 75, Serigne Thiam 92) AET

Final

23/10/14

DPR Korea 0 Qatar 1 (Akram Afif 52)



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Quartet Complete Line-Up For Women's U-19 Finals

Uzbekistan, Iran, Australia and Thailand completed the line-up for the 2015 AFC U-19 Women's Championship after topping their respective groups during November's qualifiers. Uzbekistan topped Group A with a 100% record ahead of Jordan, India and Lebanon, while Iran posted wins over Sri Lanka and Palestine to seal progress from Group B.

And with Australia winning all three games in Group C against Vietnam, Hong Kong and Singapore and unbeaten Thailand finishing clear of Myanmar and Chinese Taipei in Group D, the quartet completed the line-up for next year's tournament in Nanjing alongside automatic qualifiers Korea Republic, DPR Korea, hosts China and Japan.

Uzbekistan made the ideal start to the qualifier

in Amman by posting a 2-0 win over India before easing to a 7-0 victory over Lebanon, to set-up a final day decider with hosts Jordan, who also began with back-to-back victories.

But with Nilufar Kudratova taking her tally to seven goals in three games, Uzbekistan completed a 100% record in Group A by recording a 3-0 win over Jordan.

And India claimed third place after fighting back from one-goal down to record a 3-1 win over Lebanon.

In Group B, hosts Sri Lanka and Palestine shared a goalless draw in the opening fixture at City Football Complex in Colombo.

Iran, though, proved too strong for the hosts on Matchday Two as a hat-trick from Shabnam Behesht secured an opening 4-1 win in the three-team group.

And Iran topped the table with a perfect record as Fereshteh Khosravi's first half hat-

trick saw the Group B winners ease to a 6-0 win over Palestine.

In Hanoi, substitute Beatrice Goad scored twice as Australia opened their Group C campaign with a 6-0 win over Hong Kong, while Vietnam recorded an 11-0 victory over Singapore.

Sunny Franco then scored five while Jordan Baker found the net on four occasions as Australia downed Singapore 19-0, while Vietnam maintained their perfect record with a 6-0 win over Hong Kong.

And it was Australia who sealed top spot in the group after a crucial 3-0 win over hosts Vietnam.

Finally in Group D, hosts Thailand beat Chinese Taipei 2-1 before sharing a goalless draw with Myanmar to top the table after the opening fixture between Chinese Taipei and Myanmar had ended goalless.



Group A

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|------------|---|---|---|---|----|----|-----|-----|
| Uzbekistan | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 12 | 9 |
| Jordan | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| India | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 | -2 | 3 |
| Lebanon | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 13 | -12 | 0 |

05/11/14

Jordan 3 Lebanon 0

Uzbekistan 2 India 0

07/11/14

Lebanon 0 Uzbekistan 7

India 1 Jordan 3

09/11/14

Jordan 0 Uzbekistan 3

India 3 Lebanon 1

Group B

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|----|---|-----|-----|
| Iran | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 9 | 6 |
| Sri Lanka | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | -3 | 1 |
| Palestine | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | -6 | 1 |

07/11/14

Sri Lanka 0 Palestine 0

09/11/14

Iran 4 Sri Lanka 1

11/11/14

Palestine 0 Iran 6

Group C

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|----|----|-----|-----|
| Australia | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 28 | 0 | 28 | 9 |
| Vietnam | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 17 | 3 | 14 | 6 |
| Hong Kong | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 | -11 | 3 |
| Singapore | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 32 | -31 | 0 |

05/11/14

Australia 6 Hong Kong 0

Vietnam 11 Singapore 0

07/11/14

Hong Kong 0 Vietnam 6

Singapore 0 Australia 19

09/11/14

Australia 3 Vietnam 0

Singapore 1 Hong Kong 2

Group D

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | +/- | Pts |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|
| Thailand | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Myanmar | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Chinese Taipei | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | -1 | 1 |

05/11/14

Chinese Taipei 0 Myanmar 0

07/11/14

Thailand 2 Chinese Taipei 1

09/11/14

Myanmar 0 Thailand 0



One Goal Launched In The Philippines

The AFC, World Vision and the Philippine Football Federation launched the One Goal campaign at the end of November on the sidelines of the AFC Annual Awards in Manila.

The 'One Goal: Nutrition for Every Child' campaign is a global initiative which focuses on promoting good nutrition among children through sports development, particularly football and volleyball coaching lessons and a summer camp.

And the Philippines joined the likes of Australia and Malaysia with active One Goal programmes following the launch at Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila University Field.

"The goal of this campaign is to promote nutrition among children through sports development," said World Vision Associate Director for Public Engagement Jun Godornes.

"It is our joint dream, with the two football organisations, to develop a new breed of

Filipino football athletes that can compete in the international football arena."



AFC Village Honoured At Awards

The success of the AFC Village, a scheme designed to assist the people of the Philippines affected by Typhoon Haiyan, was celebrated at November's AFC Annual Awards.

AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter and Philippine Football Federation President Mariano Araneta Jr. handed over plaques to land donor Ramon Pedrosa and the Executive Director of the Gawad Kalinga Community Development Foundation, Inc. Luis Oquinena.

In line with the AFC's commitment to social development initiatives using the power of football, the confederation committed its funding to assist and, as a result, the AFC Village has been built on seven acres of land donated by Ramon Pedrosa in Libertad – Palo, Tacloban.

In total, 27 houses were built after the AFC, along with the Philippine Football Federation, joined forces with Gawad Kalinga Sipa G, as well as housing recipients sourced from both the local area and outside the community, namely Tacloban

University and College students.

The AFC also worked with Leyte Football Association to construct a grassroots football field with the aim of inspiring the people of Palo to play football.



AFC Inaugurates Hall Of Fame

The first 10 members were inducted into the AFC's Hall of Fame during the AFC Annual Awards in Manila at the end of November.

Iranian legends Homayoun Bhezadi and Ali Daei, Japanese duo Yasuhiko Okudera and Homare Sawa, Saudi Arabia's Sami Al Jaber, Malaysia's Dato' Soh Chin Aun, Sun Wen from China, Korea Republic's Hong Myung-bo, Baichung Bhutia from India and Australia's Harry Kewell were all recognised for their services to Asian football.

"It is great that the AFC is recognising former players in this way. It really is a great step forward," said Al Jaber.

"For me personally, the respect and honour that comes with being inducted into the Hall of Fame means an awful lot, and rates very highly in my career highlights.

"It is important to have this Hall of Fame, as all those being inducted have great footballing records and a superb pedigree, it is excellent that they are being remembered in this way."

Toyota Signs On As Full AFC Partner

Toyota strengthened its involvement with Asian football by becoming a full AFC partner after committing to the AFC's Club Programme for a further two years to add to their existing National Programme agreement

The Japanese automobile company has been an official sponsor of AFC's national team tournaments since 2012, and will now also support AFC club competitions including the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup .

"We are delighted to welcome Toyota as a full partner of the AFC in the year of our 60th Anniversary. Toyota

is one of the leaders in the automobile industry globally and they have been supporting Asian football for a long time," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

"The AFC believes Toyota will maximise its sponsorship programme as an AFC partner and the AFC will also receive great benefits from Toyota's activities.

"The automobile category is very important in Asia and this field will only get bigger and more important. The AFC is fully appreciative of Toyota's support and believes this enhanced relationship will mutually strengthen our bond and benefit our long-term partnership."



Draw For U-23 Championship Qualifiers Takes Place

The draw for the rebranded 2016 AFC U-23 Championship took place at AFC House in the Malaysian capital city of Kuala Lumpur at the start of December.

Iraq, who won the inaugural event at the start of 2014, were drawn in Group A alongside Oman, Bahrain, Lebanon and the Maldives, while runners-up Saudi Arabia will face Iran, Nepal, Palestine and debutants Afghanistan in Group C.

Group A Iraq, Oman, Bahrain, Lebanon, Maldives

Group B Jordan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan

Group C Saudi Arabia, Iran, Nepal, Palestine, Afghanistan

Group D UAE, Yemen, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka

Group E Syria, Uzbekistan, India Bangladesh

The 10 group winners and five best-second placed teams from all 15 groups following the qualifiers, which will take place at the end of March 2015, will qualify for the finals of the competition and join hosts Qatar in the 16-team championship in January 2016.

The AFC U-23 Championship will serve as the Olympics qualifiers in every alternate edition, with the top three teams from the 2016 edition earning the right to represent Asia at the Olympic Games in Brazil.

Group F Australia, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei

Group G DPR Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Philippines

Group H Korea Republic, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Brunei Darussalam

Group I Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Macau

Group J China, Laos, Singapore, Mongolia



Women's Olympic Qualifying Stage Set

The draw for the first round of qualifying for the women's football tournament at the 2016 Olympic Games took place at the start of December, with 11 teams split into three groups.

Myanmar, India, Bahrain and Sri Lanka were drawn in Group A, with Group B consisting of Uzbekistan, Jordan, Hong Kong and Palestine, while Chinese Taipei, Iran and Laos were drawn in Group C.

The winners of each group following the round-robin first round will advance the second stage, where they will

be joined by Thailand and Vietnam, with only the winner of that round going onto join Japan, Australia, DPR Korea, China and Korea Republic in the final round.

And the leading two sides from the final round will represent Asia at the 2016 Olympic Games.

Group A Myanmar, India, Bahrain, Sri Lanka

Group B Uzbekistan, Jordan, Hong Kong, Palestine

Group C Chinese Taipei, Iran, Laos



ACL Slots Allocated For 2015-2016



The AFC's Competitions Committee has confirmed the slot allocation for the 2015 and 2016 editions of the AFC Champions League. The decisions were made based on three criteria, namely the AFC Member Associations 2014 Ranking, the AFC Champions League Criteria and the Club License of the clubs eligible to participate in the competition.

Korea Republic, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Uzbekistan lead the way with three teams from each country gaining direct access to the AFC Champions League group stage, while the quintet will each have one representative in play-offs.

Australia, the United Arab Emirates and China will receive two direct entries plus places in the play-offs, while Thailand, Qatar and Vietnam have all been allocated one slot for the group stage as well as play-offs berths.

Indonesia, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Malaysia, India, Singapore, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman and Bahrain will have one representative each in the play-off stage, with teams failing to advance to the group stage of the AFC Champions League taking their place in the group stage of the AFC Cup.



AFC Cup Teams Learn Fate For 2015-2016

The AFC's Competitions Committee has ratified the slot allocation for the 2015 and 2016 editions of the AFC Cup.

The decisions were based on the AFC Member Associations 2014 Ranking, the AFC Cup 2015 qualifying round for the play-offs, namely the 2014 AFC President's Cup, and club entry for participation in the AFC Cup 2015.

The Competitions Committee awarded Iraq two places in the next edition of the AFC Cup after the Member Association failed to receive slot allocations for the AFC Champions League due to their eligible clubs not being granted a club license.

Teams from Indonesia, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Malaysia, India, Singapore, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman and Bahrain would feature in the AFC Cup should they fail to qualify for the AFC Champions League via the play-offs.



STADIUM AUSTRALIA

Sydney, Australia

Stadium Australia will add another chapter to its rich history on January 31 when the 83,500 capacity venue located within Sydney's Olympic Park hosts the final of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Located just 14km from the city's central business district, Stadium Australia is

Australia's home ground and will be the major venue for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, hosting seven games in total including four matches in the group stage, a quarter-final and a semi-final as well as the final.

Stadium Australia was purpose-built for the 2000 Olympic Games and was officially opened in June 1999 when the Socceroos played the FIFA All Stars.

The stadium has since hosted a number of

Socceroos internationals, including the famous 2006 FIFA World Cup qualifier against Uruguay that sent Australia to the finals for the first time in 32 years.

An important centre for national and international events, Stadium Australia is environmentally sustainable and design features include ventilation and natural cooling and heating, while rainwater is recycled from the roof to irrigate the pitch.





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Tim Cahill

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